

MARK 10:23-31—THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE KINGDOM OF MAN

INTRO: Two weeks ago we looked at what I think is a very powerful reason why we can know that Christianity is true, namely, fulfilled prophecy. Another reason why we can know that Christianity is true and Jesus is who he said he is—specifically, God come to earth as a man—is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The apostle Paul indicates that the resurrection is the “bottom line” of Christianity. He says in **1 Cor 15: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless.”** Tim Keller puts it this way, **“If Jesus rose from the dead you have to accept all He said; if he didn't then why worry about any of what he said?”** BTW, if you are interested, I summarize the evidence for the resurrection in my ECLEA book *Christianity & Islam*, which is on the ECLEA website: www.eclea.net.

Why am I saying all this? The reason is that it is very easy for everybody, Christians and non-Christians alike, to gloss over or sugarcoat many of the things Jesus says. Christians *say* that he is Lord and that he is number 1 in our lives. We *say* we believe the Bible. And yet we often fail to understand or act on the implications of what Jesus says—particularly his so-called “hard sayings.”

One of those hard sayings is in Mark 10. And it particularly applies to us in America, as we will see.
Mark 10:23-31 [READ]

PROP: Jesus is telling us that his kingdom is a different kind of kingdom—and it reveals what our core values really are.

O/S: This passage is divided into three sections: in **vv.23-27** Jesus contrasts the KOG and the kingdom of man by looking at money; in **vv.28-30** Jesus describes the nature of the KOG; and in **v.31** Jesus provides a summary that brings us back to the beginning.

CONTEXT: Today’s passage follows immediately from, and is based on, Jesus’ encounter with the rich young ruler in **vv.17-22**. In that encounter, a rich young man ran up to Jesus, knelt before him, called him “Good Teacher,” and asked him **“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”**

Jesus said, **“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”** In saying that, Jesus was asking a rhetorical question. He was saying to the man, **“Do you really know to whom you are speaking?”** As one writer puts it, **“Jesus was not denying that he was ‘good’. Rather, he was pressing the man to see the logical implication of addressing him as ‘good’, namely that he is God!”**

Jesus went on and directed the man to the **10 Commandments**. The man said, **“I’ve kept all these things from my youth up.”** Jesus then said, **“One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”** But the man went away grieving, because he had a lot of money and possessions. That’s the context. And that is what prompted Jesus to say, **“How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the KOG!”** Which leads us to:

I. Money and the KOG versus the kingdom of man

In **vv.23-25**, three times Jesus emphasizes how hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the KOG. His disciples were amazed at this, but that’s why Jesus repeated it again and again.

Why were his disciples amazed? We shouldn’t be surprised. They were amazed because they were just like us. Their values are our values. The world always looks up to wealth, position, and power. God and his kingdom are not like that. God said, **“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isa 55:8)**. Jesus told Pontius Pilate, **“My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36)**. Jesus once told Peter, **“Get behind me, Satan! . . . For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matt 16:23)**.

That is why what Jesus said in vv.23-25 is so vital to understand, particularly for us in America. In America, on average, U.S. families have a net worth of approximately \$176,000, compared to just \$128,000 in the second-wealthiest country, Switzerland. Our average household wealth is 10X more than such countries as Latvia, Estonia, and Poland, and 40X more than such countries as Turkey and Mexico. And we are not even in the same league as most households in Africa.

A book came out some time ago called *The Millionaire Next Door*. The researchers found that millionaires disproportionately live in middle-class and blue collar neighborhoods, not in affluent, white-collar communities. As the book points out, in this country, if one follows the simple principles of the millionaires next door, everyone has the potential and ability to accumulate large amounts of wealth.

That’s why what Jesus says in vv.23-25 is a hard saying—particularly when we put it alongside what he said in Luke 14:33 [READ]. We are like everyone else in the world: we all need money and we all want

money. But *we* also have the ability to get it and, to a large degree, we already have. Even the poorest person in this room is rich compared to most of the people in most of the rest of the world.

So what do we do with the fact that it's harder for a rich person to enter the KOG than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle? One thing we shouldn't do is point to someone like Bill Gates and say, "**I'm not rich; he's rich; Jesus' statement really doesn't apply to me.**" That, I think, would be a very dangerous thing to do. We will come back to this in a few minutes, but part of the answer lies in **vv.26-27**, where the disciples asked, "**Then who can be saved?**" Jesus answered, "**With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.**" Jesus is talking about how to enter the KOG.

Many passages in the Bible—either explicitly or implicitly—make it clear that for anyone to enter the KOG (or, as the disciples put it, to "be saved") God must first choose us. Why is that the case? The reason why we cannot save ourselves or earn our own salvation is because every human heart is corrupted. We focus only on ourselves. The Bible says, "**No one seeks for God**" and "**we are dead in our trespasses and sins.**" Dead people cannot give themselves new hearts. Therefore, left to ourselves, we would *never* choose him.

But in the person of Jesus Christ, God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves: he lived the life we should have lived; he paid the penalty for our sins that otherwise we would have to pay but never could; and through the Holy Spirit he gives us a new heart, which enables us to respond to him. When we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, as **Rom 10:9** tells us, our belief and confession is the *result* of what God first has done in us, not the *cause* of God's choosing us.

Even though God is primary in all things, he nevertheless enters into *real* relationships with people. We are not mindless automatons with no will of our own. We *can* make real choices. Therefore, he gives us real practical tests so that we can know what our spiritual state truly is.

A few minutes ago we mentioned how God's thoughts are not like our thoughts and how Christ's kingdom is not of this world. That tells us that the KOG is not like the kingdom of man. IOW, the KOG has different values, different priorities, and is formed on a different basis than earthly kingdoms. Jesus expressed the core value of the KOG when he said that the entire Bible is summed up in two commands: "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.**"

Why should we "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength"? Because he is the creator: he made us; he sustains us every instant; we owe him everything. He is the sum of all perfections, all goodness, all beauty. He *is* love. Why should we "**love our neighbor as ourselves**"? Because every human being has been made in the IOG. How we treat God's image shows what we really think of him. Therefore, even my relationship with my neighbor ultimately reveals my real relationship with *God*.

That, I think, is why Jesus says how hard it is for a wealthy person to enter the KOG and why he talks about giving up all of one's possessions. He is giving us a practical test so that we can evaluate and know our true spiritual condition. He is taking one important aspect of our lives—our money and possessions—as a practical test of whether we really love him and desire *his* kingdom, or we really only love ourselves and desire our own kingdom.

What Jesus is saying here is not new. Over 400 years before Jesus came to earth, Israel was back in the land after the exile in Babylon, but God was not blessing them. Why? Because they were divorcing their wives and marrying pagan women, they were bringing sick and lame animals for sacrifice, and they were not obeying the Law of Moses as they should. In short, they were *saying*, "**We love God and he is number one to us,**" but their lives showed that they really loved themselves first and foremost.

So in **Malachi 3** God made them a very practical proposition. He even said "**put me to the test.**" The test was this: "**Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, and see if I won't bless you until it overflows.**" God was doing in Malachi essentially what Jesus is doing here in **Mark 10**—looking to our money as the proof, the test, of who or what we really trust, who or what we really love, and who or what is our real Lord.

In the same vein, Jesus said, "**Don't store up your treasure here on earth, but store it up in heaven.**" How do we store up treasure? We all know how to store up our treasure on *earth*: savings, investments, buying stuff. But storing it up in heaven—how do we do that? By *giving*—to help the poor and the needy and to build the kingdom. That's why Jesus told the rich young man, "**Sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, then come follow me.**"

The Bible does not say that we have to walk around in rags and live in a mud hut. It does not give a dollar amount that we cannot exceed. To the rich young ruler, Jesus said, "**Sell everything you have.**" On the other hand, Zaccheus the tax collector decided to give *half* his possessions to the poor, and Jesus said "**today salvation has come to this house.**"

The issue primarily is an *internal* one, in your own heart and mind—but that internal change will affect what we do with our money. What I do with my money is the outward and visible sign of who or what is most important to me—IOW, who is my real Lord. The specific amounts and percentages will differ among all of us, because our circumstances are all different. But the *issue* is the *same* for all of us: Is Christ and his kingdom really most important to me, or is getting ahead and having a comfortable life really more important? We can't fool God with our use of money, and I'm not sure that we really can fool ourselves either.

This is a matter of extreme spiritual importance—our eternal destinies hang on it. So we had better consider this carefully, and reassess it regularly. We must always have the mindset that, **“Every dollar I have really is not mine—God has simply lent it to me to manage for *him*, and I will be giving an account of my management to him on the Day of Judgment. What I do with my money reveals who or what I'm really living for.”**

We need to ask ourselves two questions: What (or how much)? and Why? By that I mean: What or how much am I giving to help the poor and the needy? What or how much am I giving to missions? What or how much am I giving to build the KOG?

The other question is: Why? Why am I giving to help the poor and needy and build the kingdom? Is it because I am trying to earn God's favor? Or is it because I feel guilty because I have so much? Those are the answers of unsaved people. On the other hand, are you giving because you already have *received* God's favor through Jesus Christ? Has he changed you on the inside so that you can say, **“I love him; I love his people; so I can't help but give!”** That's the attitude of the person who is part of the KOG. The amazing thing is, if you get the “why” question right, then the “what” and “how much” tend to take care of themselves.

The early church understood this. Acts 4:32 says, **“The congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.”** Whenever the believers saw a needy person among them, they would sell their property and it was distributed to the poor. They were not living in a socialist commune. They all had their own money and owned their own things; and they could sell their own property, as Acts 4 tells us.

The early church was characterized by radical generosity. The reason is that they had a new *mindset* concerning their money and possessions. They could hold onto their money and things lightly and give freely—because of what God had done inside them. He changed their lives. And they loved him and loved his people. So they couldn't help but give—freely and generously, gratefully and joyously—to benefit the poor and needy and grow the kingdom.

Those early Christians could stand with a clear conscience before God and point to what they did with their money as the proof that they were indeed members of his kingdom. Can we do the same? I hope so. If not, then now is the time to reevaluate and reprioritize what you are doing with your money, so that you too can say, in good conscience, I do love Jesus and this is the tangible proof! That leads us to vv.28-30:

II. The nature of the KOG

In v.28 Peter said to Jesus, **“We have left everything and followed you.”** Jesus picks up on that in v.29 by talking about leaving homes, families, and farms. Jesus is talking about leaving everything that we value so highly. And, BTW, he mentions farms because the farm would be the source of one's income, IOW, their jobs. So Jesus is giving us another practical test that reveals who or what is most important to us.

Leaving homes, family, and jobs primarily is an *inner* leaving that may or may not involve an outer leaving. For example, Peter actually left his job as a fisherman, but Luke continued to be a doctor. The disciples were all married, but they did not abandon their wives: 1 Cor 9 talks about how they brought their wives with them when they ministered.

What Jesus means in v.29 is like what he said in Luke 14:26 [READ]. That is a very Hebraic way of expressing a contrast. He is *not* saying that you must emotionally hate your family members (“**Mother, I can't stand you!**”). After all, we are to love our neighbor as ourself and even love our enemies. Instead, what Jesus is saying in Luke is, **“Compared to your love for *me*, those other loves should be as if they were hatred when weighed in the balance.”** So in vv.28-29, we “leave” our earthly family and things that now mean the most to us, not by abandoning them, but by viewing them in a new light in which Jesus is first in everything.

The reason why Jesus said this is because, in v.30 he says that, when we enter into a saving relationship with him, we are adopted into a new, spiritual family—his family, the church. We receive new parents, siblings, and children. This is very real particularly to Muslims who come to faith in Christ. Muhammad said that anyone who leaves Islam should be murdered. And I know of several African Muslims who came to faith in Jesus whose lives in fact were threatened by their own family members. But they come to salvation anyway, because they know that, even though they lose their earthly families, they become part of a new family.

You see, the nature of the KOG, the nature of the church, is a *family*. One writer puts it like this, **“The**

church is not *like* family; it is family. . . . This can be seen by the fact that the word *disciple*, so prevalent in the early part of the New Testament, disappears after the book of Acts. It is replaced by the term *brother* in the rest of the Bible.” (Lewis 2015: n.p.)

That is why Jesus says in v.30 that you receive 100X now—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms. What he is saying is, “**Families take care of each other. If you lose your own house and need a place to stay, you can stay in my house. If you need a job or financial help, your new family is here for you. If you lose your old friends and family, you have a whole new set of friends and family—larger and (hopefully) more loving, caring, and compassionate than the earthly friends and family you lost.**”

Don’t have fuzzy, sentimental thoughts about the church as a family. *Our* lives are not at risk when we become Christians as is true for Muslims. Therefore, church for us can be more of a social club than a real family. That is not what Jesus intends the church to be at all. He means it to be a real, practical, loving community where everyone can see—by how we relate to people and what we do with our money—that our lives have been turned inside-out by Jesus.

This entire passage is confronting us—hitting us right between the eyes—regarding our attitude toward money, our attitude toward people, and who or what is most important to us: our earthly, physical lives and families or Christ and his kingdom and family. How we play this out may differ among each of us, but it may well require some changes. The importance of the church as your true family is highlighted by the fact that our earthly families will end when we die. If you have earthly family members who are not Christians, you will never see them again. On the other hand, we will be spending forever with our true spiritual family. So don’t you think we should start treating them as beloved members of our real family now? That leads to Jesus’ conclusion in v.31.

III. Jesus’ summary that brings us back to the beginning

Jesus ends by saying, “**But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.**” He is again confronting us with the fact that, if you put your worldly success or your worldly family first—if that is what you live for—you have gotten your reward. But it will all end when you die—and in the judgment that confirms where you will spend your eternity, you will lose.

What Jesus is doing in Mark 10 is taking those things that are most important to us—our money, our family, our home, and our job—and asking us: “What is more important to you, me or them?” Our eternal destiny hangs on our answer to that question. Most people don’t think of Christianity like that. And most people don’t think that Jesus would ever make such a demand on us. But he did and he is.

But the paradox is if we put Jesus first in all areas of our lives, including our finances and our families, the paradox is that we will tend to have much better financial lives and better families. Nancy and I have been married for 39 years and have been Christians for over 36 years. But it’s only been in the last 10 years or so that, beginning with her (but when I saw what it was like, I followed suit), we have tried to put Jesus more and more first in our marriage. What we have found is that our marriage is better now than it has ever been.

We also have made various financial decisions—particularly with respect to our giving—which, I think, have made some difference in this world. More importantly, this has enabled us (I think) to be able to stand before God with a clear conscience that we have not kept back too much for ourselves. I may be fooling myself a little bit here. When I come to the end of my life I may have some feelings like Oskar Schindler, the man who saved many Jews during WWII. At the end of the movie “Schindler’s List” he said, “**I could have got more out. I could have got more. I threw away so much money. You have no idea. This car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten more people. This pin. This is gold. Two more people ... at least one. I could have gotten one more person ... and I didn’t!**”

CONCL: We all may, and I’m sure will, have various regrets when we come to die. But in today’s passage, Jesus is warning us so that we may avoid the ultimate regret. But he is doing more than that. He is showing us what is most important to *God*. He is showing us what *his* values and *his* priorities are. He is taking the very things we all value so much—our money, our homes, our families, and our jobs—and using them as the test of who or what is *most* important to us: Jesus and his kingdom, or ourselves and the kingdom of man. He is giving us the opportunity to assess our lives, to repent of what we need to repent, and to change what we need to change.

Yes, he is confronting and challenging us. So take up the challenge. Do what you need to do in terms of your finances, your relationships and, most importantly, your relationship with him. Because if your relationship with Jesus is the way he wants it—the way it should be—as you obey him and find your life in him, your finances and relationships will tend to fall into proper alignment. If we do that, we will never regret it.