

“How Difficult is it for a Rich Man”

In the Holy Name of Jesus. Amen.

“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” For the rich man kept all the Law. He led a pious and good life. But Jesus upped the ante. He says to him, **“you lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”** (Mk. 10:21). The rich young ruler loved his great possessions more than God, he leaves Jesus disheartened, and instead following his possessions into death. Jesus’s great compassion fell on deaf ears. Who among us, if charged to take all that we have and give it to the poor would not balk, leaving sorrowful?

This was the Gospel reading from last week. Jesus this week uses the rich man as an object lesson to continue to teach us. Jesus turns to look at us, lest we too fail to hear His message.

“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

The American dream guides us to the easy and wide gate of personal satisfaction. It obscures the rugged, less worn path of poverty. We seek out a wealth of money, investment portfolios, property, and vehicles. We desire after richness, following it to the end of the earth. There is a rich man in all of us.

Our hopes and aspirations don’t help us either. They too can lead us away from the kingdom. The desire of visionary men is to build ungodly kingdoms on earth. Perhaps your kingdom is exercising authority over others, ruling over them without grace or mercy. Perhaps your great reputation before others builds within your heart a kingdom of pride. Your kingdom is ruled and built by affecting and influencing.

No man who follows after wealth or builds for himself earthly kingdoms will be able to see way through the narrow gate. The door of heaven that is Christ cannot be entered with our impossibly inflated egos, wide-eyed coveting, or broad-shouldered power grabs.

Repent. You cannot create your own heaven on this earth. Your self-built kingdom is not God’s kingdom. Worse yet, these kingdoms draw your eye from the goal of the faith to the goal

of your eyes and stomach. The rich man loved his wealth more than God. Our desire are little different.

While wealth is our desire, we also make those who are successful into villains. We allow our greed and envy to soil our hearts. All wealthy people must be crooks. We ought to penalize them. Better that everyone are “have nots” than anyone “have.” Our envy draws our eyes away from God’s revelation about all that we have.

We confess that God his given all that we need. There is no need to envy those who have more. We confess with the Small Catechism: “He has given me clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods. He provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life” (SC First Article). We have an abundance of what we need. We are rich in the eyes of God. This is the Father’s wisdom and is good.

The 1st century world had a similar view of the rich. Those who gained wealth through honest means were considered favored by God. Unfortunately, they though favor on this earth surely translated to favor in heaven. Those who supported their synagogue and community were honored. They deserved plaques on pews and names in service folders. They fund buildings bearing their names and positions of recognition by society. All this civil and religious good they have done surely has earned them a higher seat at the heavenly feast.

Looking around at us and at His disciples, Jesus says: **“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven”** (v. 23). The ever-bold apostle Peter thinks he gets it. Wealth is bad and poverty is good. **“We [disciples] have left everything to follow you”** (v. 28). He thinks: those who are poor will go to heaven. We disciples have taken a great vow of poverty - leaving home, family, and fields - to follow Jesus. They certainly have earned their way to heaven. Surely he has earned the high seat at the feast by his poverty.

I’m sympathetic to Peter. I’m currently in my fifth year of seminary education. My life isn’t marked by total poverty but I am by no means rich. And if the economists are right, most of you are in the same boat. Maybe you are without a job. Maybe medical bills are overwhelming. Perhaps your children’s college education is draining the bank. Perhaps you can’t cover the second mortgage to do necessary repairs.

Those first article gifts of house and property, fields and family aren't all wealth after all. They are just as Jesus told us. They come "with persecutions" (v. 30). They are as affected by the sin of Adam as is the greedy inclinations of our heart. Our houses are money pits. Our families are marked by struggles, abuse, and divorce. Our property decreases in value. Even the gift of the church is marked by arguments, dissension, and schism. The whole earth is corrupted. Even wealth is a curse.

With the world's wealth in view, Jesus's terrifies our hopes of earning a place in heaven. Jesus gives the obvious answer: "**Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God**" (v. 24-25). Neither the man who seeks and gains earthly wealth nor the man who gives all he has can enter the kingdom of God. No one can enter the Kingdom of God of himself. That is the message of the law in today's Gospel. No one is able to enter the Kingdom of God with wealth gained for heaven or earth. We are no more likely to enter heaven than a camel to pass through the eyes of a needles.

Thanks be to God that "**with man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible for God**" (v. 27). We are the baptized. Our corrupted will and bodies have been destroyed by water, defeated in God's merciful flood. The impossible feat was accomplished by his mighty hand. All our lives we rush to be first, the greatest in the kingdom of the earth. Christ's flood kills us, making us last, dead to the world. We lose our materialism and thirst for power in the blessed font. All the evil corrupt desires of our heart are washed away in the blood of Jesus. We leave behind everything for the sake of Jesus.

With Christ, last place is good. Those who have poverty lay themselves at Christ's mercy are made first in the kingdom of God. In baptism, we are like Christ, who gave himself over to Pilate, the Pharisees, and the Jews to be crucified for our sake. His humiliation is our exaltation. "**But many of those who are first will be last, and the last first**" (v. 31).

Our faith is not in the desires of this world but in Christ's blood and righteousness. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has won for us eternal life. Eternal life is the gift of faith in Christ, the fruit of His death. Jesus's audacity astonishes. His sacrifice for us amazes.

THE WEALTH OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE.

St. Paul said it this way: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:3-5).

In Christ’s example you see the pattern set forth for the Christian life. It is as Jesus says: we have given up everything to follow Him but we receive it back a hundredfold. What does this mean? In baptism we are made the children of His family, members of His house, and inheritors of His field. Look around. Next to you sits your brother or sister in Christ. Christ’s family extends beyond the borders of this place. His family extends wherever His sacraments are administered according to his instruction, and the Gospel is preached rightly.

In the church, we have houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children, and fields by the hundredfold. We have, with this wealth, persecutions, which do not beset those who live outside the church. We suffer together for the sake of Jesus and for the Gospel. We suffer poverty of want for we know that greatest gift has already been given to us in our baptism and after persecution, we will receive eternal life.

Jesus deflates our egos into hearts of humility. He redirects our eyes to be thankful for the great gifts he has given us. His chastisement crushes our strength so that we may show love and mercy to our neighbors. These virtues are impossible for our flesh but entirely possible for God. No one can enter God’s kingdom except through Christ. Praise be to God He has won this greatest gift for us. The wealth of God is eternal life. Amen.