

Loving God Before and In All Things
based on Mark 10:13-31, David Jahnke, 3/15/15

Since we are nearing Easter, I decided to jump ahead to chapter 10 in this sermon series on Mark. So that we could take a look at some of the last things that Jesus said and did before his triumphant entry to Jerusalem. We start with children who are good enough for Jesus. They inhabit His Kingdom naturally. Yes they are silly and playful and selfish and emotional and immature and a bother when we are trying to work. But they want to go to Jesus. And they want to receive love and mercy. And they are full of joy and hope and trust. And those are the keys to the Kingdom.

And then a good important man comes to him and asks, “Good teacher, how can I inherit eternal life?” and Jesus replies, “Why do you call me good? God alone is good.”

This is the framework for the entire discussion which follows. “What can we do to be good enough for the Kingdom of God?” Right from the start, Jesus lays down his cards. No one is good. And then instead of providing a profound interpretation of the Law of God’s goodness which any good rabbi should have been ready to provide, Jesus simply recounted a few commandments.

All of this must have really puzzled the man. “No one is good? And yet all I have to do is keep the basic commandments? I have done that since I was a boy, Jesus! What are you trying to say?” And Jesus looks at the young rich man and loves him, just as he loves the children.

We have to pause here because the man’s encounter with Jesus is bookended with challenge and discouragement. First Jesus tells him no one is good—with a strong implication about the man himself-- and then at the end, he tells him that he should sell everything he has, give it to the poor and follow him. He cannot do this and he walks away sad. And there is this distance between him and Jesus.

But here in the middle is the crux, literally of the matter. Jesus loves the man for doing his best to obey God. And even though he would not be able to do all that Jesus called him to but Jesus would never stop loving him. And as someone pointed out on Tuesday night at the deacons’ meeting, we do not know how this encounter changed this man. It surely stuck with him and maybe he started to give more and more of his possessions to the poor. Who knows if he did not one day become a follower of this man who had looked at him and loved him.

I asked the deacons whether they could imagine an encounter like this with Jesus. Getting a chance to ask Jesus the most important question; hearing him tells us to keep doing what is right; thinking that's easy enough since we have been basically good since we were little; seeing Jesus smile back at us with love. But then hearing about something that is causing us to stumble. This makes us sad. We feel a distance from Jesus. But then we have a chance to work on it, just as this young man did.

And we work on it by attending to the two halves of the most important commandment. Loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves. We love God first because he empowers the love of our neighbors and ourselves. And also because he is before and in and directing all that is good. So loving the great Giver teaches to receive all of life with gratitude; and that we must then share good things with others.

The man's stumbling block was not money or possessions which are good things. It was how he understood them and what he thus did with them. He thought his possessions were his own property and thus his to keep. That was his stumbling block.

Did you see the famous televangelist that wants a leer jet? He has a fitting name-- Creflo Dollar--he is making an appeal to his followers for a \$65 million leer jet. Someone commented about whether he planned to fly to heaven with it. This, I think, gets to the heart of the matter. Creflo and his mission teams could live like angels or gods, zipping from one place to the other with the freedom, comfort and luxury of their own jet. No more dealing with lines, other people or ever-narrowing seat sizes.

Comfort, freedom, power, money, pleasure-- these are all good things. It is not wrong to love them. But what is coming first? Is an always self-giving God who wants to make sure everyone has enough first and governing our love for all good things? Or has a love of these things taken priority and shaped our understanding of life and God?

Jesus shows us what love is when he tells the man to give all of his possessions away. He says something similar in the gospel of John— to love means to give up your life for your friends.

Now at the deacons meeting the other night, someone rightly wondered about just how much God is calling us to sacrifice. If we are not careful, constant sacrifice can lead to burnout and dis-health and even a despising of ourselves or our lives or our work or family. We are not God who does not need anything and can constantly work or give.

Another deacon added us that Jesus calls us to love our neighbors *as ourselves*. We must be gracious, kind, patient, and encouraging of ourselves; and give ourselves plenty of rest. We should allow the good things that fulfill us a prominent place. Because God's Spirit is in those places. And this may sound schizophrenic...but we have to recognize and, in a way, receive the gifts that we have to offer! Intelligence, compassion, faith, patience...whatever comes natural to us blesses us first and foremost.

Kingdom living begins with receiving life and love and rest and play-- and accepting ourselves-- just as a child does. But as we mature, we know it cannot end with us. That is a dead end, literally; a huge boulder of a stumbling block blocking the path to the Kingdom.

The blessings become curses. When things are just for me or mine, the blessing of money becomes the curse of greed; the blessing of comfort becomes the curse of luxury and lethargy; the blessing of pleasure becomes the curse of insatiability; the blessing of security becomes the curse of isolation from the other who might harm me. The things themselves get bigger and bigger until we are so bloated that we are prevented from experiencing life the Kingdom of God.

Jesus told the disciples that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus highlights wealth here because of all the power, freedom, pleasure and influence it can afford, making it the most tempting idol to follow. But every popular idol makes it difficult to enter the kingdom, including the self, family, work. All the things that we think life is about; all the things that we think save us other than God can become barriers to the Kingdom.

The root of the young rich man's problem was not being able to trust Jesus more than his wealth. The wealth had brought him so much meaning and pleasure and power that this was what could save him. And that's why Jesus told him to give it up. The same goes for family, work, the self—they are all so central to meaning and purpose and joy and power and salvation that we trust them more than God to save and fill us.

Trust me, says Jesus, and give those things up to God; let him reign over them and follow me into the wonders of the Kingdom. Look at how God clothes the lilies of the field! Will he not always care for you? So trust my Father's mercy and be freed from your own shortcomings. Trust in His providence and be freed us from anxiety about the future. Trust in the Spirit's power to transform and open yourself to Him through prayer and study. Trust that God is the giver of all that is good in your life and discover gratitude and joy.

Seth and I read this passage the other day. I told him that I had heard that the eye of the needle was a geographic location in Palestine that was very narrow and impossible for a camel to make it through. Seth said something about all of the stuff on a camel and maybe if you took everything off of the camel, it could get through. Needless to say, this brought quite a smile to my face.

We enter the Kingdom as we shed the burdens of control and possessiveness, personally and materially; as we surrender everything to God. The good things that come our way, we do not want to possess and control them; we receive and share them. The activities that we enjoy are taught to the unknowing and underprivileged. The comfort we have felt is shown to the troubled. Daily bread is shared with the hungry; love and mercy given to the lonely and afflicted. The gift of family is extended to those without families or estranged from them.

Peter reminded Jesus of all that they had given up to follow him. And Jesus tells him what anybody who does this will receive in this age— a hundred times as many homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields. This referred to the early church; they still had their families and would return to them or bring them along. But they now also had brothers and sisters throughout the Mediterranean who would care for and love them. The homes and fields they had left had multiplied. They would shelter, sustenance and hospitality with their brothers and sisters wherever they went. Such is life in the Kingdom of God. May we trust this, entrust everything to God and thus come to the fullness of God's Kingdom. And God's people say...