

October 17, 2021 | Journey Worship Service

TEXT: [Mark 10:17-27](#)

TITLE: **Inheriting Eternal Life?**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Recently there have been a bunch of movies and TV shows filmed here in Pittsburgh. I know of at least five different ones because a couple of them have used our church either for filming or as a place to feed their cast and crew. Since our “black & gold” town is now the “Tinseltown of the East,” let’s imagine that today’s gospel lesson was being filmed for a Hollywood movie. The cameras start rolling when from stage left a handsome, well-dressed young man crosses over and kneels down in front of where Jesus is standing. He says his line impeccably: *Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* There is a subtle irony in this question since it seems clear from outward appearances that this young man is already quite wealthy. Now he is asking about how to add to his earthly fortune a heavenly fortune. The movie director signals the shift to camera #2 and waits for Jesus’ reply.

Jesus looks up at the man and first deflects the attempt at flattery: *Why do you call me good? There is no one good except God.* Then Jesus lists off six of the Ten Commandments. It is quiet on the set; the lighting is just right as the handsome young man proudly replies, *All these things I’ve done since my youth.* The director smiles and thinks “What a great guy!” when Jesus speaks one more time: *Then go and sell all your possessions; give your money to the poor and come, follow me.* At this the Hollywood director jumps up and shouts “Cut!”

As he walks over to where Jesus is, the director is thinking there was no way Jesus’ answer could be a part of this movie’s script. Didn’t Jesus realize what the rich young man’s net worth was? Weren’t his good deeds enough? The movie theater audiences would hate hearing this message about selling all he possessed as they munched on their popcorn and Milk Duds. So the director took a breath and tried to get Jesus to soften his line a bit. He suggested that he tell the rich young man this: *You and a select few of my followers will be asked to sell all their possessions and lead a life of poverty and devotion.* That way people would know Jesus was talking about monks and nuns who lead lives of poverty, instead of speaking directly to each of us. When Jesus shook his head, the director made a second suggestion: *Maybe you can re-phrase your comments and speak more symbolically? You could tell the young man to rid himself of whatever barriers that hinder him from leading a life of faith. You know, things like pride, insecurity, doubt, envy, whatever. Surely that is a better answer than putting all this focus on the messy topic of money.*

But Jesus remained unmoved. He replied, *I meant what I said. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the realm of God.* Jesus had no interest in last minute edits to the script. He wasn’t going to say something to make us think that he was only talking about this one particular rich man—or only referring to a few religious orders who take vows of poverty—or spiritualize the whole conversation so that his words apply to vices, vanity, and various other sins. Jesus

meant to talk about money, because very often money (how it is hoarded by some, withheld from others) can be an impediment to how we live spiritually. It complicates our spiritual lives. It is not something outside the life of faith, something secular that doesn't apply to that which is sacred. It's a big part of the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man—but in truth it is not the only thing they talked about. In fact, it's not even the main topic of their conversation. Let's roll back the film and replay the footage to see what this passage is truly about.

Before the whole business about camels and needles is mentioned, a really big question is dropped at Jesus' feet: *Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* Inherit eternal life—win the prize of salvation. That is the question that troubled the young man enough to disturb Jesus on that day. He asked about personal salvation, but Jesus asked him about personal relationships. Jesus named off a bunch of the Ten Commandments—the ones that deal with relationships with others: have you murdered or committed adultery, stolen or given false witness; have you cheated or dishonored your parents? Salvation is not a credential you carry around like a passport or a COVID vaccination card. Salvation is something made real in the space between you and a person right before you—family, stranger, whoever. The rich young man asked Jesus “How can I get to heaven?” and Jesus replied, “First tell me with whom you are walking to heaven and how you are caring for one another as you travel together?”

Secondly, after Jesus listed off several of the commandments, the young man told him that he'd followed these rules since his youth. Scripture says Jesus looked upon him with love and then Jesus invited him to follow him. What an incredible honor! And to do that would mean leaving behind all that had given him security before – like Peter, Andrew, James and John did when they walked away from their fishing boats; like Matthew did when he left the tax gatherer's table; like Mary Magdalene did when she left her support network or Martha and Mary did when they dropped everything to provide hospitality and support to Jesus whenever he needed it. For this young man, to follow Jesus meant he had to sell his possessions, give them to the poor, and walk a new path. Jesus extended a loving call to re-prioritize his life and follow where he leads. And he does the same to each of us.

So how do we respond to this lovingly and faithfully? That's another big question. In my sermon for the next service, I mention something from the science of astronomy that I believe is applicable here for this question. In March 2009, NASA launched the Kepler telescope into space. It had a fixed orbit and focused on just one patch of sky in the Cygnus constellation. If you extend your fist into the sky, the area covered by your hand is roughly the area studied by Kepler. For most of human history, we believed our solar system had the only planets in it. But Kepler changed all that. In its eight years of study, it found more than 2,300 planets in that little patch of night sky. We now believe there are more planets than stars in our universe, and many exist in a sweet spot that could potentially support life. The Kepler telescope built on what we knew and then expanded our awareness exponentially.

The message Christ came to share—that the apostle Paul wrote about to the young churches—and which we teach our children and preach about each week is that God’s plan is far beyond what we can imagine, dream, or fully understand with our human hearts and minds. It’s a gospel about power made known in weakness, about love revealed in sacrifice, and about a Savior who was crucified, buried, and then resurrected. We can be like the rich, young man and believe the path to eternal life is about following the commandments—but we’re missing the big picture.

Jesus spoke about possessions and money and camels and needles, it’s true – but mostly, over and over again, Jesus talked about relationships. “Come, follow me” he said to the rich, young man. “Come and see” he said to Andrew when he stopped listening to John the Baptist and caught up with Jesus that fateful day. “If you do this to the least of these, you do it unto me” Jesus said in his famous sheep and goats parable. The way to step into these types of relationships is to move from a worldview that believes our solar system has the only planets in the universe to a worldview that expands exponentially and knows there are planets and stars by the billions all around us. It is to move from a worldview that defines things by our little perspective, our experiences (good or bad) and instead sees things from God’s perspective, from God’s eternity, from the height, depth and breadth of a love, grace, justice and peace that passes all understanding—of which we are a tiny part, yet beloved nonetheless.

By losing ourselves in this way, we find ourselves. In dying to ourselves in this way, we discover life. In letting go—and being small in the realm of God, we stop being camels (hanging onto wealth and possessions and status) and discover we can fit through the eyes of needles—and become seeds of change in the garden of the Lord. By faith we look closely at how we live together, weeping for wounds inflicted, wars pursued, resources hoarded or wasted, and we discover how our life is inexorably connected to millions of others in the larger web of God’s creation. We glance up at the night sky, knowing there are countless stars and even more planets circling those stars. It is all more than we have ever seen or heard, imagined or conceived. Yet such is God’s plan, prepared for us all out of love.

This approach may not work well for a Hollywood film—but it is the script of the gospel of Christ. May we play our parts well. There is so much God longs to show you and so many relationships in which you are called to daily live out this faith. Come, and follow as Christ leads us to eternal life.

AMEN