



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Why do You Call Me Good?" - Mark 10:17-27

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When most people think of idols they either think of something like a Tiki god or one of the great statues you can see in the museums of Turkey and Greece. Or they think of the next pop star waiting to be anointed on "American Idol". Well, we're going to talk about idols today and we are going to talk about what I think is the American idol: money.

When the Bible talks about idols it does so in a very sophisticated and nuanced way. An idol is anything in our lives that's more important to us than God, anything that captures our thoughts, our allegiance, our hearts more than God. Anything we pursue to give us what only God can give, is an idol.

One of the biggest mistakes most of us make when we start to learn about the biblical concept of idolatry is to think that idols are always bad things. But that is often not the case. In fact, the more the thing we put at the center of our lives is really good, the more likely we will turn it into an idol. Because if it's a good thing, it's reasonable for us to expect that it will give us the satisfaction, hope, fulfillment and security we really want to have. Anything can become a counterfeit god in our lives...especially the very best things.

I don't know about you but I

can easily come up with a very long list of potential or actual idols in my life, just from the list of great things in my life. I can tell you from personal experience that effectiveness as an associate pastor in a church can become an idol.

All of those things can be good things to have in our lives until they take over the center of our lives. Those are all wonderful things until we give them ultimate place in our lives and try to get from them an ultimate sense of value, purpose, and significance. That's when they become idols.

Today's passage from the gospel according to Mark is fundamentally a story about a young man and his struggle with his idol...money!

Mark 10:17 - *"As (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

That's a very important question. "How can I be sure that when the Kingdom of God comes in all its fullness that I will be a part of it?" That's what this young man wants to know.

He runs up to Jesus, kneels down before him and greets him as, "Good Teacher." That's a fairly unusual way for a person to

address a rabbi in first century Israel. To approach a teacher with respect and address them simply as "Rabbi", which means "Teacher" would be enough. To address Jesus as "Good Teacher" is unusual.

Verse 18: *"Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'"*

How long did Jesus let the question float in the air as these two young men stood face to face? Look at what Jesus is doing. He's preparing this young man for the angular response He is about to give him. And I think Jesus is beginning to reveal His true identity to this young man. "Why do you call me 'good'? There is only one who is 'good' and that is God alone."

So in response to his question about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers in verse 19.

You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

Verse 20 - *(The young man) said to (Jesus), "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." That sounds a lot like what the apostle Paul would one day say.*

As to keeping the letter of the law, Paul said he was faultless. Now watch this. Look at what the text says.

Verse 21- Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing..."

What Jesus is about to say to this young man is said to him not because Jesus wants to make his life miserable. What Jesus is about to say is said to this young man because He loves him and wants to set him free. Jesus says, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The main point of what Jesus is saying to this young man is at the end of that statement. "Let go of the very thing that is preventing you from becoming My disciple and then come and follow Me. Set it down and follow Me."

Verse 22: "When (the young man) heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

The word that's used in verse 22 is the same word for "grief" that's used to describe the suffering Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He faced the reality that He would have to be separated from God the Father in order to take upon Himself the sins of the world. Jesus was grieved when He considered being separated from His Father.

When this young man heard that what he needed to do was separate himself from his possessions, he was stunned and experienced a similar kind of grief. Jesus in the Garden and this young man, were both dealing with what stood at the center of their lives and defined them. For Jesus, His wealth was wrapped up in His

relationship with God the Father. For this young man it was his relationship to his possessions that defined him.

Mark 10:23 – "Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!'"

Verse 24 – "And the disciples were perplexed at these words."

His disciples were totally confused because they probably believed that material wealth was evidence of God's favor in a person's life. So they are stunned by what Jesus is saying.

Verse 24 – "But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It's hard, not just for the rich but for everyone.'"

Verse 25 – "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God."

Verse 26 – "They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Here comes the kernel of the gospel of grace. Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but NOT for God; for God all things are possible.'"

Okay, let's take a closer look at this amazing encounter. Let's listen, once again, to Jesus' angular statement in Mark 10:25: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God."

Notice that the disciples don't start cheering when Jesus talks about how difficult it is for the one percent to get into

heaven! When His disciples hear Him say this they don't reply, "Good! I don't like rich people anyway." They don't say that. They're astounded. If this rich young man can't get himself into the age to come then who can? In the parallel accounts of this story in the other gospels we're given more detail about this man. We're told in Luke that he's young and that he's a ruler. He's a wealthy, young man with power.

There are plenty of people who say that you can't really be a good person and have wealth. There are tons of people who say that if you have money, then you must have had to step on other people to acquire great wealth.

Look at the questions Jesus asks this young man. He doesn't just go down the list of the Ten Commandments. He tailors His questions for this young man. Did you defraud people? Did you steal? Did you exploit people? The young man says, "No," and Jesus accepts it. This was a good young man Jesus was talking to. Nevertheless, his wealth was standing between him and the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus says that to this young man, he walks away grieving. And Jesus' disciples are dumbfounded. If this good guy can't get into the Kingdom of God, then who can?!

Verse 25 – "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God."

Some people have tried to get around the angularity of that statement. If you've been around the church for a while you might have heard people say that what Jesus is actually talking about is a little opening in a city wall called the "eye of the needle".

It was a little gate in the wall. And if you got a bunch of burly guys together who have been working out with P90X, and if they stood clear of the camel's back legs, maybe butter up the walls of the opening and just start pushing that beast you could get a camel through the opening in the city wall. It's difficult to do but you can pull it off. Well, I've ridden a camel. That doesn't make me an expert on camels but there is no way you're going to push a camel through a small opening in a city wall.

To deal with the angularity of this statement, other people say that Jesus is not talking about a literal camel. They say there's a word in Aramaic that sounds like the word for camel but means twine or rope. So it's difficult to get twine through the eye of sewing needle but if you wet the twine, twist it tightly, work at it for a while you can get it through the eye of the needle. It's hard but not impossible. That's not what Jesus is saying.

When Jesus says that it is difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God what he's saying is that it is not just difficult, it is impossible from a human perspective. No matter who you are, rich or poor, if you're banking on getting into the Kingdom of God based on your good deeds you are not going to enter the Kingdom of God.

What Jesus says is that it is impossible to get a literal camel, like the one I rode in Jordan, through the eye of a needle like the one you'd use to sew a button on your shirt. It is IMPOSSIBLE for the rich to get into the Kingdom of heaven. In fact, it is impossible for any of us, in our own efforts, to get into the Kingdom of God. It is impossible for any of us to be a

part of the age to come...IF we are trying to get there based on our own moral achievements.

We have a couple of expressions in English like the one Jesus is using in this story. We say something has "a snowball's chance in a very hot place of happening." That's what Jesus is saying about getting into the Kingdom of God by being a good person. When we say that or if we say something will happen, "when pigs fly" we're saying the same thing Jesus is saying about camels and eyes in needles. Pigs are never going to fly, despite what those goofy GEICO commercials claim.

So whatever you're talking about, know this: it isn't going to ever happen. It's not because wealth is bad in and of itself. It's impossible because money can prevent us from coming to God in the humility and the dependence of a child, which is the only way anyone can enter the Kingdom of God. All of this may be impossible for us, but it is possible for God.

Let's take a close look at this young man. First, when he comes up to Jesus he's obviously troubled. If we were to look at him we'd say he's on the top of his game. But something is eating away at him and we discover that as we watch him with Jesus. He's successful. He's probably good looking as many wealthy people are. I mean, not all rich people are good looking...look at Warren Buffett. But if you go down the San Francisco peninsula to Atherton, you're going to see a high percentage of fit and attractive people.

Attractive people have an advantage in our world. I'm sure it was no different in Jesus' day.

This young man is probably the envy of every person in his community. And because he is, he's probably hated by many. Jesus' disciples were a bunch of guys you'd find today down on the docks at the fish auction. Have you ever been to the Pikes Place market in Seattle? What do you see there? A bunch of guys, with a day or two's growth of hair on their face, yelling at one another and throwing fish. Guys like that, guys like some of Jesus' disciples, don't naturally gravitate to rich guys like this good looking, virtuous, successful young man Jesus is talking with.

If he were still unmarried, I'm sure there were a number of families who were negotiating with his parents to try and land this young man. But appearances can be deceiving. Underneath it all, there is a young man who has a very important question to ask Jesus.

Underneath his good looks, his wealth, his fine clothing, beyond his brand new year aught '30 chariot, he's wondering about the deeper questions of life. He's led a good life. He's successful and still there's something eating away at him. He's still uncertain about whether he has done everything he needs to do to make it into the age to come. He's at the top of his game and yet he still has a sense that something is missing.

That's what can happen when you make it to the top. It's one of the strange gifts of success. When you've achieved great success, when you've acquired great wealth, when you've made to the top of the class, when it seems like you've got it all, sometimes there still seems to be something really important missing. That realization can be a gift.

So, this young man comes to Jesus to ask about what he needs to do to obtain eternal life? What else does he need to do? He's got it all and yet there's something eating away at him. That's the kind of uncertainty we experience when we have tried to establish our standing with God based solely on our own good deeds and achievements.

Jesus looks at this young man and the text says, "Jesus loved him." In order to try and set him free, Jesus goes after the false god in his life that is preventing him from coming into the Kingdom of God. Jesus goes after his money and his stuff.

"Go sell everything you have and give to the poor and come and follow me." Give it all away, not because being wealthy is wrong. Give it all away because your possessions, your money, your wealth is what you've built your life around and that is not a strong enough foundation for something as weighty as your life. Give it all away because those things are what you're using to try and cover up that deep sense of inadequacy.

Jesus is trying to help him see that entry into the Kingdom of God is not a function of human achievement. Giving money and possessions to the poor is not a good work that will buy his way into the Kingdom of God. His possessions are preventing him from seeing how great his need is for what only Jesus can do for him.

Every person must receive the Kingdom of God as a gift and it can only be received at the point of helplessness. What He's saying is that if you want to be a part of the age to come, when heaven and earth will finally be united, you need to change your relationship to even the good things in your life

because those good things are preventing you from coming to God in humility and the dependence of a child. You've made them false gods.

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City writes, "Our contemporary society is not fundamentally different from the ancient ones (where people bowed down before physical idols, statues of gods). Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its 'priesthoods,' its totems and rituals. Each one has its shrines – whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios, or stadiums – where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and to ward off disaster.

"What are the gods of beauty, power, money, and achievement but these same things that have assumed mythic propositions in our individual lives and in our society? We may not actually burn incense to Artemis but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige... (People) sacrifice everything to the god of success, but (what they discover is that) it (isn't) enough. In ancient times, the deities were bloodthirsty and hard to appease. They still are."

Jesus is the ultimate rich young ruler who gave it all away for us. Jesus, the real rich young ruler, gave it all away when He became a man and died on a cross so that we might become rich. And now, if you've entrusted your life to Christ, you belong to God.

When we begin to settle into the truth that we belong to Christ, that we are safely within his grasp, that we are so deeply loved by God that He would set aside His riches so that we might become truly wealthy in the things of God, we will begin to understand that money is just money. Careers are important but they're just careers. There is something far more important that we need. We are being offered a relationship with God Himself—as a gift. If we don't have that relationship with Christ, everything else we have will never, ever, ever be enough.

Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also found at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com