

Is He Talking to Me?

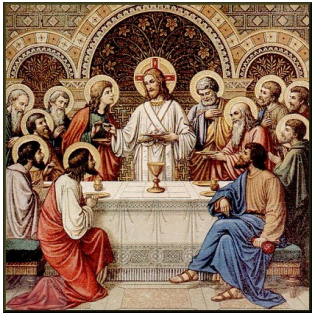
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Mark 10:17-31, Proverbs 11:24-28

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

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Ah, Jesus. I love Jesus. And I listen when he talks. Don't you? Doesn't everybody?

Have you noticed how easy it is to take some of Jesus' words literally and truly? "Love your neighbor as yourself." You bet Lord. I'm working on that.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent!" and "Let the little children come to me." Oh, yeah, we love those sayings of Jesus. We hear them, and we try to do them. They make sense. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." Yep! You say it, Lord, I'm working on it.

"Go, sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, come, and follow me."



¹Wha??? Um, Jesus, what are you talking about? Are you talking to me?

Let me tell you something, friends. I've been in a lot of places around the world – places in Africa, or South America, or the Middle East – where people have sat in rooms like this one and read these words of Jesus, and they have said, "Amen. Wow, that's great stuff! Good news!"

But so often, when I hear this read in the United States, which is, by the way, the richest place in the history of places, the comment I most frequently hear is, "Hmmm. Well, obviously, Jesus did not intend to be taken literally here. What do you think

¹ *Christ and the Rich Young Ruler*, Heinrich Hoffman (1889)

he could possibly have meant?”

Today, we're going to continue in the Gospel of Mark, and we're going to look at another of the hard teachings of Jesus.



As Mark tells the story, it appears as though the man is an earnest seeker. Some of the other folks who ask Jesus questions appear to be doing so just to trip him up, or to get him in trouble. But this man begins the conversation after having participated in the very undignified practice of running up to Jesus and stopping him. Then, he gets on his knees and speaks in the most respectful of tones. He seeks to honor Jesus in a way that seems legitimate, and Jesus responds to his initial query by listing the second tablet of the ten commandments: “You know what to do,” Jesus says. “Everybody knows.”

Again, the man appears to be sincere in his conversation with Jesus about his neighbors and his treatment of those around him.

Once more, Jesus appears to be impressed with the man, and Jesus then does two things.

First, he “looks” at the man. In some of your bibles, it might say he “beholds” him. The word that is used there is a word that is apparently special to Mark, and it is used intentionally. In fact, he uses it in verses 21, 23, and 27. Each time, it is meant to convey the fact that Jesus was completely attentive to the one in front of him. His eyes reflect his full engagement; he is wrapping the person with the entirety of his presence. I hope you know how it feels to be looked at this way: intimately, with focus, kindness, warmth, and affection.

We know that this is what Jesus meant to convey with that look because the next phrase in the Bible tells us that Jesus “loved” the man. And when you read that, you might say, “Well

whoop-dee-do! Jesus loved him. Isn't that what Jesus does?" And you'd be correct, of course; Jesus does love. However, the Gospels only speak directly of Jesus loving a very few people: Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha; the apostle John, and the twelve disciples as a group. This man is the only person outside of Jesus' inner circle who is specifically named as one whom Jesus loved.

So, friends, whatever Jesus is going to say, we ought to be aware of the fact that he is saying it while being fully attentive to the one in front of him and in a spirit of deep love for that one.



²Jesus then utters the five imperatives you've already heard this morning: Go, and Sell, and Give, and Come, and Follow. You may be interested in knowing that this is the only time that Jesus looked someone in the eyes and said, "Follow me", and the other person said, "um, nope." This is the only "call" story that ends in a refusal.

Jesus saw something in this man's relationship to and fascination with his material wealth that was troubling, and he called the man on it. And then, he turned to the disciples, and *looking at them* (note the same piercing, loving gaze), he turns it into a teaching moment. Some scholars have pointed out that when Jesus has an interaction like this with a specific person, and then Mark tells us that he pulled the twelve in closer around him, that this is Mark's way of helping the early church be attentive to a specific command from Jesus.

If that's the case, well, it was surely effective in this instance. The earliest Christians believed strongly that Jesus intended to be taken literally here. All of them thought that he would return to earth imminently, and so it was a common practice among the first Christians to do exactly this – to sell all their possessions and

² *The Rich Young Man Turns Away Sorrowful*, James Tissot (1896)

support those who were suffering. The more that these believers realized that Jesus might take some time before his return, the easier they found it to do other things with their money – build churches, save for the future, buy a second horse... whatever.

Do you remember last week when Jesus was so angry because his followers were hindering the children from coming close to him? I think that in this instance, Jesus recognized that the man's money was a hindrance – that his wealth stood between him and Jesus in a way that made an eternal difference. And just as Jesus forbade the disciples from getting in the way of him and his love for the children, here he laments the fact that this man's money stands between him and God's best for him.

As I look around the room this morning, I see that there are a lot of people here who have travelled with me to places where life and culture is, well, different than that to which we're accustomed. Some of these places are remote and difficult to reach, like Malawi or South Sudan. Others are closer, but are definitely different: think of our visits to the Native American reservations. Maybe we've traveled to one of the hollers in the Great Smokey Mountains or some other part of Appalachia together; heck, some of you have even been to Ohio with me. You know, someplace where things are just done differently.

So let's pretend now that we're going to a place we've never been before. Let's call that place Walla Walla Washington. Now, as I say, I've never been to Walla Walla, so I'm just making this up. This is an example.

So let's say we get off the plane in Walla Walla, and we meet people who seem friendly enough. We get to talking, and we happen to bring up that we are people of faith. We talk about what it means for us to follow Jesus, and to worship God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And let's say that our hosts beam excitedly as we talk about our spiritual lives and they exclaim, "Hey, us too! We're religious! We worship God, too! But we

don't call him Jesus. We know God as Electrolux, Whirlpool, and LG.”

At this point, our faces look, well, like yours look now. “Whaaaaat?” we croak out.

The Walla Wallaites sense our confusion and they say, “Look, would you like to come to worship with us? It will make things much easier to understand.”



So off we go – and we find ourselves entering a large room that looks, for all intents and purposes, like a laundromat. As we arrive, there is a woman wearing a *very* crisply starched white dress standing in front of the room reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

Then she steps aside and she puts what appears to be a load of laundry into a washing machine. Everyone says “Amen” and begins to do what looks like prayer to the washing machine.

We are confused and baffled, until one of you says, “So, wait... are you saying that your god – Electrolux, Whirlpool, and LG – that your god is a washing machine?”

And our hosts say, “Yes, Amen. Blessed be the name!”



And then we say, “Well, wait – does everyone in Walla Walla believe this way?” And they laugh, and say, “Well, of course not everyone believes *exactly* the same. There’s a group of Amish who pray to a slightly different God [photo of washboard]; and to be

honest, we Presbyterians are the only ones who believe in pre-sorting, but, well, yeah. Most of us believe essentially the same thing.”

And you want to yell and scream and shake someone and say, “Oh, come on, people! For the love of Pete! That’s a machine! You’re pouring your worship out on a TOOL, for crying out loud!” But we are polite and respectful and, well, Western Pennsylvania Presbyterians, so we don’t say much.

Now let’s say that a few days after we get home, you see your dad putting a load of laundry in (because, well, it *is* Monday). Do you fear for his soul? Do you throw yourself in front of the washer and say, “Father, no! Stay away from this demon!”?

Well, probably not. You lament the way that sometimes the world is a place where people find themselves bringing supreme honor and reverence to that which is undeserving of those things; you are saddened by the thought of people attributing Divine characteristics to a creature. But you don’t stop using a tool just because someone else is using it wrong.



I hope you can see where I’m going with this, beloved. What is your attitude toward money and possessions? Are they an object of worship? Is having the right amount of money in your wallet, the right car in your driveway, or the right clothes in your closet the thing that is going to save you, or make life all better for you? Is that the thing that is going to bring you ultimate happiness? Is that what tells you *who you are*?

Because if you look to those things for your identity – if we see our money and possessions in this way, then they are indeed hindrances to our ability to follow Jesus. They are in our way no less than they were in the way of that man 2000 years ago.

But is it possible that you have some of these things: you have some money, you have some possessions, but they do not

have you? Are you able to see the money that you have and the things that you own as tools that actually *help* you to follow Jesus, to be faithful, and to share love?

Ah, but HOW do we do that? How do we ensure that while we may have money, money does not have us?

Jacques Ellul was a French philosopher and theologian who wrote about the relationship between humans and money in a book creatively entitled **L'homme et L'argent** (which, translated means, *Man and Money*). In it, he describes the best and most appropriate way to protect our hearts and lives from the destructive power of money and possessions.

When money is no more than an object, when it has lost its seductiveness, its supreme value, its superhuman splendor, then we can use it like any other of our belongings, like any machine. Of course, even if this relieves our fears, we must always be vigilant and very attentive because the power is never totally eliminated. There is one act par excellence which profanes money by going directly against the law of money, an act for which money is not made. This act is giving.³

In the 36 years of our marriage, Sharon and I have sought to limit the ability that money and possessions have to rule over us by seeking to set aside a percentage of our income and dedicate that to the Lord's work. When we got married we were able to give 10% away, and by God's grace that number is higher now.

In a few moments my friend Ron will stand up here and talk with you about your ability to join Sharon and me in the joys of supporting this congregation financially. I think that my job today is, well, to be like Jesus. To look at you, to love you, and to tell you the truth. And Mya already did that, when she read from Proverbs: "Sometimes you can become rich by being generous or poor by being greedy."

³ *Money and Power*, Jacques Ellul (Wipf and Stock Publishing, 2009), p. 110.

Thanks be to God! Amen.