

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 10:17-31

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This is a call story like the stories of Simon and Andrew and James and John at the beginning of the Gospel. This is a call story in which the disciple who is called says no and doesn't follow Jesus. Jesus functions as a spiritual director, as one who is helping this man and his disciples to discern their vocation and who is reflecting on that.

The spirit of the man coming up and falling at Jesus' feet, or kneeling before him, is one of exaggeration. He is very strong in his subjugation to Jesus and in throwing himself at Jesus' feet to ask the question. It is overdone. So also is his flattery: "Good teacher." Jesus' response, therefore, is first of all to get things down to a more sober human level: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God." The spirit of Jesus' response is, "Let's just cool it a little bit so that we can explore your real question."

Then Jesus says, "You know the commandments." These presumably are the things you have to do in order to inherit eternal life. The man's recital of the commandments is probably a response of relief and joy. He is saying, in effect, "I've done all of these! Does that mean I'm in? Does that mean that I can inherit eternal life?" Jesus' response and its tone is indicated clearly by Mark. This is one of those instances where you know what the spirit of Jesus' response is because Mark explicitly states it: "He loved him." Thus, all of the words that Jesus then speaks to him—about leaving everything, selling everything and giving to the poor, becoming a follower—are spoken out of love. What's important in the way you tell this is to make these loving words.

Afterwards, the man is sad and leaves, so Jesus' words are also probably sad. His words here are often heard as commandments, proclamations, or pronouncements about the difficulties of the rich getting into the kingdom of heaven. However, the spirit is actually one of sadness and recognition of how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is a comment on the struggle that Jesus had just witnessed as the man considered the possibilities and chose to leave instead of to follow him.

At this point in the story, the disciples are perplexed because of their assumptions about the relationship of rich people in the kingdom of God. The general assumption in Jesus' culture was that rich people were blessed by God. If you were wealthy it meant that God had blessed you. Therefore, the assumption is that the rich are already present in the kingdom of God. Instead, what Jesus identifies is the struggle that is present for rich people of giving what they have for the kingdom of God and not being bound by their wealth to maintain basic patterns of the lives of rich people. His description is a metaphor. Whether the metaphor is about the gap in the wall, the so-called "eye of the needle" in the wall of Jerusalem, or is about the eye of a sewing needle, we don't know. Whatever it is, it is an expression of Jesus' recognition of how hard it is for rich people to

enter the kingdom of God by becoming disciples and following the commands of the kingdom of God.

The disciples recognize this. It looks as if nobody can be saved, that nobody can become part of the Kingdom of God and be saved from the wrath to come. Jesus' response is, "Right. With people it is impossible to be saved." There isn't anything that anyone can do, including selling all that they have and giving it to the poor, that makes it possible to be saved. It's only possible with God. God alone can dispose people's spirit to full openness to the kingdom of God. Peter's question is a natural response: "Well okay, but we left everything and followed you. What does that mean about us? Does that mean that we cannot be saved either?" Jesus' reply to this question is a blessing that whatever anyone has left they will receive tenfold in this age and in the age to come, eternal life. The promise that the man asked for at the beginning of the story is promised to the disciples.

The final comment is once again a qualification. He explains that many will be saved, but many who are first in this age (namely, those who have been blessed with wealth) will be last. Furthermore, "the last" (those who are not regarded with honor, who have not been given the gift of wealth in this age) will in the age to come be first. The paradoxes of the relationship between wealth and the Kingdom of God are graphically experienced in this story.

Also, notice that Jesus does not say it's impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It's hard for everybody. This is because everyone is dependent on the grace of God. The promise is that the wealthy who give their money to the poor, who help build a more just relationship in the distribution of wealth, will be blessed and will be given the gifts of the Kingdom of God. What is implicit in this story is a blessing of the redistribution of wealth by the gifts of the rich to the poor. This is good for poor people, but the core of what Jesus teaches is that it is good for rich people. It is a source of their being freed from being bound to the structures of this age and their ability to contribute to the coming kingdom of God.