

The Plight of the Overprivileged

by Ray C. Stedman

Our passage in the Gospel of Mark today brings before us two familiar stories: Jesus' blessing of the children, and the story of the rich young ruler. Mark links these two stories together; preachers seldom do. Almost always these are treated in separate messages. But it is very helpful to see how these two incidents tie together, and how they will lead us into an understanding, from the lips of Jesus, of what money and riches and the pursuit of wealth will do to us. We start with the story of the blessing of the children, found in Mark 10, beginning with Verse 13:

And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.
{Mark 10:13-16 RSV}

This passage properly has been called the Magna Carta of the children, the Bill of Rights of children everywhere in the world -- their rights to be appreciated and valued highly. Artists love to paint this scene, and if you have any imagination you can easily picture it -- Jesus gathering the children around him, one wriggly little boy on his lap, a little girl standing demurely at his side looking up into his eyes, others clustering around, clamoring for his attention. It is a beautiful scene, one which has proven to be a source of tremendous blessing to thousands upon thousands of children around the world, throughout all the centuries past.

I want to touch on only two major points in this account, because I want to tie it with what follows. The first is Jesus' rebuke of the adults in this situation, the disciples. Mark indicates that the disciples were trying to protect Jesus by preventing the parents from bringing their children to him. But, when Jesus saw it, he was indignant. In fact, the language is sharper than that in the Greek. He was angry, and severely reprimanded these disciples. He said, "Don't do that; stop it! Let the children come unto me; for to such belongs the kingdom of God." Now, these disciples meant well, as adults often do with regard to children, even though they do the wrong thing. Yet they missed the point of the life of a child. This is what Jesus was correcting. These disciples thought that Jesus needed protection from bothersome children. But what Jesus points out is that the children needed protection from stumbling adults. So he says to the adults, "Stop hindering them, let the children come to me. Get out of their way, and let them come."

This is highly significant, because it indicates that children were made for God. This is what Jesus is saying -- that he and children were made for each other. You cannot read this without seeing how attractive he must have been to children. They loved him immediately, and wanted to come to him. And he indicates here so clearly that it is easy to come to Jesus when you are a child. He is the one they need, above anyone else. More than anything else, children need Jesus. This is what he is saying. The one thing adults ought to concern themselves about, with respect to children, is to get out of the way and let them come to Jesus, and not to put roadblocks in the path, obstacles arising out of their own selfishness, but to let them come.

The second significant point in this passage is the qualities of childlikeness which Jesus says are absolutely necessary to enter the kingdom of God: "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." He does not go on to elaborate what these qualities are. He leaves it up to us to discover them as we look at children, for they are something every child represents. Regardless of their background or culture or race, or anything else, every child has these qualities. The commentators have had a field day trying to guess what they might be, but Jesus leaves it up to us to try to discover them.

I am a card-carrying grandfather, and lately I have been conducting extensive research into this subject, observing my little grandchildren in an attempt to discover what qualities Jesus has in mind. I want to present

to you the findings of this exhaustive and exhausting research I have undertaken!

The first and most obvious quality about children is that they are simple, but not in any derogatory sense. I mean by this that children are basically uncomplicated, elemental. They go right to the heart of things. This is why children can ask such frank questions. If you pick up a little child in your arms, he is liable to look at you and say, "How come you have such a big nose?" All your adult friends have managed to evade that subject for years, but a child will come right out and ask it. They go right to the point. There is no beating around the bush nor any pretension about them; they are forthright.

This is true in every area of their lives. When their bodily needs are demanding, then that is what they want satisfied. They want to eat when they are hungry. They want to sleep when they are sleepy. They will go to sleep no matter who is around or what is happening. If they want to eliminate, they do so. In the realm of the soul, when they need love, they will come to you and seek affection, make their need known. They are curious in mind, want to explore whatever is before them, and will go right ahead with it. In the realm of the spirit, they are so expressive of the sense of wonder.

I saw a mother dragging a little child down the street one day. The child saw some mica flashing in a stone and stopped to pick it up. "Oh, mother, look! There's stars in the stone!" The mother grabbed her arm and said, "Oh, come on; we haven't time for that." This is the sense of wonder and of mystery in a child, and this is what Jesus meant.

A childlike spirit is one which captures this elemental directness.

And a child is wonderfully teachable. Every child wants to learn, and is ready to be led. Children recognize their basic need for help and instruction, and they are wide-open, plastic, and easily molded. This is characteristic of children, and this is what Jesus meant.

Third, every child is by nature obedient. Some of you parents will take exception to that, I know, but that is because you have trained them otherwise. By nature children are responsive. They respond to what they are taught. They are trustful; they put it into prompt and immediate action. They do not delay, they do not wait, they do not say, "Well, I've got to think this over for awhile," as adults will. If you tell them something, or they see something, or they have learned something, they will do it without delay.

These are the characteristics Jesus had in mind. They are essential, he says, to enter the kingdom of God. When you are concerned about your basic needs, and you listen to the teaching of Jesus, and understand what he says about you and about him, and respond immediately and wholeheartedly to it, the door to the kingdom of God is wide open to you -- not only to enter it initially, but to grow and develop in it, and to become whole and strong and healthy. This is what Jesus underscores by this beautiful picture of the qualities of childlikeness. So let us move on in the story, as Mark does, to the incident which immediately follows:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." {Mark 10:17-18 RSV}

This is the incident we usually refer to as "the story of the rich young ruler," for Luke and Matthew tell us that this young man was very wealthy, and that he was a ruler, an aristocrat.

What an amazing picture! This splendid, handsome, attractive young aristocrat, coming and kneeling at the feet of this peasant teacher from Galilee. Notice his opening question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It is obvious from this that the young man had just heard Jesus. He was evidently present when Jesus answered the Pharisees' question on divorce, and he saw Jesus blessing the children and rebuking the disciples, telling them they must become like a child to enter the kingdom of God. Something awakened in this young man's heart as he listened, and as Jesus starts to leave he comes running to him. Kneeling down before him, he says in effect, "All right, how? How do you enter the kingdom? What must I do to inherit eternal life?" You cannot read this without seeing that this young man, whoever he was, possessed at least the first of those qualities Jesus said you must have in order to enter the kingdom. He was direct, forthright; he came

immediately to the point. His sense of need was aroused and awakened, and he did not wait; he came right out and asked, "Lord, what must I do?"

Notice Jesus' reply: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Many have puzzled over why Jesus said that to this young man.

Some of the more liberal commentators have said that this is one clear occasion when Jesus denies that he is God. Their argument goes like this: Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God." In asking "Why do you call me good?" he is, in effect, denying that he is good: "Don't call me good; I'm not good. Only God is good, and I'm not God." This is one line of approach you can take with regard to these words.

But it is equally valid to take it as a claim to deity on Jesus' part. What he is really saying to this young man is, "Look, why do you call me good? What do you mean by 'good'? If you understand what good means, you will understand that only God is good. Therefore, if you call me good, you must understand that you're calling me God." That is an equally valid interpretation, and certainly is in line with all the rest of the claims of Scripture concerning Jesus and his claims about himself.

So it is apparent that he is probing this young man, searching to see if he is willing to investigate and learn -- in other words, to see if he is teachable or not. He has already demonstrated the quality of elementary and uncomplicated directness. He came immediately with the question on his heart -- came running, and knelt down before him -- his heart open and seeking. Now Jesus says "Are you teachable? Are you willing to investigate, to think something through?" Then he tests him on the final quality: "Are you obedient?" Verse 19:

"You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud [i.e., covet, or steal], Honor your father and mother.'" {Mark 10:19 RSV}

"What has God said to you? Have you obeyed? Are you obedient?" This young man's response is beautiful. He says without hesitation,

"Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." {Mark 10:20 RSV}

Notice that Jesus does not say to him, "Well, you must be keeping something from me. I don't believe that." He does not imply at all that this young man is lying to him, or even deceiving himself, in any way. He seems to accept, to be satisfied with this young man's reply. No wonder Mark goes on to say, "And Jesus looking upon him loved him." Here is an open-hearted, beautiful, moral, excellent young man. Jesus observing him and hearing his answers, loved him -- because he had the qualities which make it possible to enter the kingdom. But he has one thing more to say to him, Verses 21-22:

And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. {Mark 10:21-22 RSV}

Jesus is saying, "You have the qualities it takes to enter the kingdom. You are simple and direct, you are teachable, and you are obedient. That is, you have been. Now let's see how much you have retained of those qualities How obedient are you now? How far do you carry this willingness to act upon what you know to be true? You lack but one thing: go and sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me."

There is an ironic humor in the young man's response: "He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." Would you go away sorrowful if you had great possessions? If you had just won fifty thousand dollars in a television give-away program, would you go away sorrowful? No, you would be rejoicing. But this young man went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions. Why? Of course the answer is that he

could see there was no way he could serve two masters. Jesus in that marvelous way of his, had pierced right to the heart of this young man's life, right to the deep things of his spirit, and had shown him that he was owned by another god. This young man, who had everything that money and power and youth could give him, nevertheless had wanted something far more important. He saw it, caught a glimpse of it, wanted it -- eternal life not just living forever, but a quality of life he knew he lacked, an emptiness within his spirit he could not fill. But he knew this could fill it, and he wanted it. But he was sorrowful, because he also knew, at the words of Jesus, that he had to give up the other in order to have this; he could not have both. This is why he went away sorrowful -- because he had great possessions.

As you know, I do not believe this is the end of the story. I pointed this out in the initial message in these studies on Mark. I believe, from various indications in Scripture, that this young man was Mark himself. It is only Mark who tells us that when Jesus looked at this young man, he loved him. How could Mark know that, if Jesus had not told him? And Mark was indeed a rich young man, a member of the aristocratic ruling class in Israel. He fits this picture in many ways. And only Mark tells us of the young man who flees from the scene of the arrest of Jesus, leaving his garment in the hands of the soldiers, and runs off naked into the night. If this was indeed Mark, then there must have come a time when this young man, weighing what Jesus had said, understanding that he was putting all his present comfort and material wealth in the balance against eternal life, against the importance and value of his soul both now and in eternity, understanding that he was giving up the satisfaction of all the deep things of his manhood in exchange for these paltry riches, decided to put it all away and obey Jesus. He gave everything away, and had nothing left but a robe, and came and followed Jesus. And that is why he writes this Gospel.

Now, this is my own speculation. It is not what the Scripture teaches. It is the Stedmaniac view. You may not agree, and that is fine. But our Lord picks this incident up and goes on to teach some things about affluence in the account which follows:

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." {Mark 10:23-27 RSV}

This is a very remarkable statement that Jesus makes. In it he highlights two facts. The first is the terrible danger of affluence, of riches, of seeking to get rich and loving the things money can buy. This, he says, does terrible things to the soul. Most of us, if not openly then at least secretly, are envious of rich people. We wish we had money. We say so ourselves. And yet, if we really understood what Jesus is saying, we would not feel that way. We would feel sorry for them. We think them overprivileged; Jesus says they are underprivileged. They are deprived people. There is so much they are robbed of by the things they have. So Jesus goes on to point out the terrible danger of affluence. "It is impossible," he says, "for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Let us not minimize his language here. He puts it very bluntly and plainly, and uses a very vivid metaphor. He says, "For a rich man to get into the kingdom of God is more difficult than for a camel to crawl through the eye of a needle." I know that some commentators attempt to soften this by explaining that the "eye of a needle" referred to a tiny gate, about four feet high, located in the wall of Jerusalem, and that by squirming and wriggling a camel could conceivably get through it, and that this is what Jesus is saying here. I do not see much evidence to support that view. I think Jesus meant a literal needle -- and you can make it a big darned needle, if you like, with an eye you could put a piece of string through. But try to imagine a huge, lumpy, humpy camel trying to squeeze through a needle's eye, and you get the picture Jesus' disciples got. They interpreted him correctly. Jesus is saying to them, "It's impossible." And that is what they thought. They said, "Well, then, who can be saved? What rich man will ever make it, if that is what riches do to you?" And Jesus admitted it. "With men it is impossible..."

Why is it impossible? What do riches -- money, wealth affluence -- do that make it so impossible? It is clear

from the context that riches and money and wealth and affluence tend to destroy the qualities you must have in order to enter the kingdom of God. They destroy the childlikeness of life -- and you can see why. Affluence creates a concern for secondary values. Rich people are not worried about where their next meal is coming from; they worry about what it will taste like, and what the setting will be. Rich people are not concerned about whether they will have a roof over their head and clothing to wear; they are taken up with fashion and style and decor, and whether they are in the right mode or not. They are not concerned about whether they worship God rightly or not, but whether they are in a beautiful building which pleases them aesthetically. Riches transfer their concern from the elementary, the necessary things, to the secondary things. This destroys simplicity in life. It is why we have had a revolt of the youth in this country, who have risen to denounce materialism and its emphasis upon other than basic values. Young people have cried out with a loud cry, "Down with the establishment! We don't want it anymore! We want to go back to simple living, to natural ways," because riches destroy simplicity.

Furthermore, affluence destroys teachability. Have you noticed that some wealthy people seem to exercise power which they do not really have in themselves? Stripped of their riches they would appear to be simpletons, almost fools. But because of the power of money and the fact that they can make people jump whenever they want them to, they often are deceived into thinking they are wise and intelligent when they are not at all. Now, some are wise and intelligent. I do not mean to put down all rich people. But affluence destroys a teachable spirit, because it creates a false sense of power and authority. The man who has power because of his money begins to feel that he ought to be the teacher. He does not need to learn -- he already knows everything! This makes for arrogance and indifference, and for insensitivity to the needs of others, for isolation and a lack of concern. This is so often characteristic of the wealthy. They may not mean to be this way, but that is what money does. It is a dry rot which eats away at the simplicity of life, and at the sensitivity of the heart, and removes people from the realities of life.

Finally, affluence gradually enslaves those who are attached to it. It builds an increasing dependence upon comfort, upon "the good life," until people reach a point where they cannot give it up. They are owned by their possessions. Like to a habit-forming drug, they become addicted to things, addicted to comfort and ease. Therefore it destroys the responsive spirit which is ready and willing to follow truth whenever it is revealed. This is what was happening to this rich young man. He almost was lost, because he was so captured, already in his youth, by the terrible power of riches. Jesus spoke of this, called it "the deceitfulness of riches" which creates illusions that are not real, makes people think they are something they are not, so that when truth hits them, they are so bound and tied to all they own that they cannot get free; they are helpless slaves.

That is why Jesus said it is impossible -- with men. But not with God. This is the note of grace, and it is the second fact he highlights. With men it is impossible, but not with God. God can break that enslavement to riches, and he does, sometimes.

One of the pastors visiting us here this week was telling me about his congregation. He said, "I have a number of wealthy people in my congregation, and they trouble me, because" as he put it, "they dabble with Christianity."

That is often true. I know of many wealthy Christians, and I find that it is rare to find one who is truly committed to obeying the Word of God. Most go along only to a point. Thank God there are some who do obey. God has reached them. I do not know how he does it, but only God can do it. He can break through, and he does, at times. Sometimes he creates in them a tremendous distaste for things and makes them so aware of an emptiness and hunger within that they lose all interest in affairs of business and wealth and money and, feeling the hollow mockery of it, like this young man, they begin to search out the realities of life. Sometimes a man has to suffer catastrophe -- almost lose his family, or get sick, or have some other disaster occur, before he begins to see things in their right perspective and comes to Christ in that way. I could tell you story after story of how God has worked to open rich men's and women's eyes to bring them back to the truth, and to show them the only way that ever has been provided.

And isn't it interesting that if a rich man does come to Christ, he must come in exactly the same way as the poorest bum on skid row! He has to acknowledge his complete and utter need, and come as a guilty sinner, wretched and miserable and vile, and receive the gift of life at the hands of Jesus from the cross. There is no

other way to come -- no other way! Rich men have to come that way, too. There is no special way provided for them, except the way that God has made for all.

In contrast to this our Lord now sets forth what happens to those who serve him:

Peter began to say to him, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time [i.e., on earth], houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many that are first will be last, and the last first." {Mark 10:28-31 RSV}

The key to this passage is the last sentence: "Many that are first will be last, and the last first." Many have asked, "What is Jesus teaching here? Is he telling us that if we have money and wealth, we must give it all away, as this rich young ruler did?"

Do we actually have to divest ourselves of our fortune and take a vow of poverty in order to serve Christ? The passage has been interpreted that way. For hundreds of years in the Christian church, almost from the end of the First Century, men and women have understood it this way. They took a vow of poverty, gave away everything and became monks and nuns and priests and hermits. Some gave up everything and went around as beggars. But did this mean they were truly obedient and fulfilling this passage?

"No," Jesus says, "many who are first, apparently, in giving up things, actually turn out to be last." You see, it is not the external things he is talking about here at all. There is plenty of testimony from the history of the church to the effect that this cannot be what he is talking about, because these practices often have not produced even the semblance of spirituality. He is talking, rather, about the attitude you have toward things. This is the key -- an attitude in which you assume that these things were given to you not for your benefit alone, not so you can have a bigger car or a finer home or a place in the country or a luxurious boat, or whatever. That is not why money is given to you. It is given to you in order that you might invest it, employ it to advance the work of the One who gave it to you. You are a steward of God's affairs, a steward of the things entrusted to you. And some day every one of us must give an account of what we used it all for. Now, using it for a certain degree of your own enjoyment and pleasure is right, too. Paul says in his first letter to Timothy that "God has given us richly everything to enjoy," {cf, 1 Tim 6:17}. But that is not the only purpose of it. It is also to be used for the advancement of his work.

If you have the attitude that the things God has given you belong to him and not to you, then if he takes them away you do not feel upset; they were not yours to start with! And if he wants to take them away and use them somewhere else, that is up to him. This is the attitude Jesus is talking about.

And he says that if you really do have this view of your possessions, you will discover that you can never give up anything that God does not richly restore to you -- in the very terms in which you gave it up, a hundredfold. Now, this is more than a hundred percent, as any mathematician can tell you. A hundred percent would mean that he gave back to you exactly the same amount you gave up. But this is not what Jesus said. He said he will give you a hundredfold. This means that for every one thing you give up, he will give you a hundred of them in return. How this is expressed in terms of percentage, I do not know. I am not that good a mathematician. But how is this fulfilled? If you are willing to hold things lightly, you will find that people will open doors to you, other brothers and sisters will have things that you can use, and you will not have to pay taxes or rent or anything. You will have homes and families and boats and pleasure outings offered to you for God's sake, by God himself, through the friendship and love of relationships with other Christians I have found this to be true.

Of course, Jesus promises persecution, too. And he lists it right in the midst of the passage, which makes it look like one of the advantages. And it is, because Jesus is saying that you will have the right kind of enemies, too. During the Watergate scandal, people regarded it as a compliment to be on Nixon's "enemies list." They took it as a credit to them that people in the administration opposed them. Jesus is saying that your enemies will be right kind, will be a credit to you. You will be glad that you have that kind of enemies, and that they are

persecuting you, because it will be to your own benefit.

When we understand this, what a difference it makes in our own life -- to hold things lightly for his name's sake, and to understand that God has committed things to us not that we might please ourselves, but that we might advance the cause he has given us. One of these days, he says, all the fronts and facades and excuses will be stripped away. And many who are last, who apparently have not given up much at all, but because they have had the right attitude about their possessions, will be first of all. And many who seemingly have given up many things, and have gained a reputation as having sacrificed for the cause of Christ, will be told to take the last seat, because they really have not given up much at all.

I want to close this message by simply reading Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6, which really are an exposition of our Lord's words in Mark:

As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed. {1 Tim 6:17-19 RSV}

The man who learns how to use money for that purpose has learned how to be poor in spirit, that he might be rich in stewardship.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for these searching words from Jesus' lips. We see again how thoroughly he understands us, how well he knows us. We pray that we will be responsive to this word, Lord, that like little children we will obey the truth we have heard, that we will not quibble with it or delay our response to it, that we will not excuse ourselves and justify wrongful attitudes, but will deal with them promptly and, like this splendid young man, come running to kneel at Jesus' feet, ready to give up our possessions and put them back into the hands of the One to whom they belong, and follow him. We ask in his name, Amen.

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