“A Different Kind of Prosperity Gospel”

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Romans 13:8-10

Mark 10:17-31

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Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commands, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not cove’; and another commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Mark 10:17-31

As he 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?’ 18Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19You 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.” ’ 20He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ 21Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money[\*](javascript:void(0);) to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ 22When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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!’ 24And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is[\*](javascript:void(0);) to enter the kingdom of God! 25It 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.’ 26They were greatly astounded and said to one another,[\*](javascript:void(0);) ‘Then who can be saved?’ 27Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

28 Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ 29Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,[\*](javascript:void(0);) 30who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

When we studied this text in our Monday morning Bible study this week, a member of the group kindly suggested that I choose a new text. We’d spent an hour struggling with it, asking questions of it, placing ourselves in the text. We finished the hour feeling more than a little perplexed. And who wouldn’t? “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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Maybe it would be better if we just picked a different text to study this week. Something happier, lighter. Balaam’s donkey, perhaps?

Today’s text is full of tension. As one commentary writer notes, “The text contains extreme demands (sell everything, give to the poor, and follow me). It contains extreme judgment (it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God), and it contains extreme promises, expressed both as a grace and a reward (with God all things are possible; whoever leaves everything and follows me will receive great rewards.).”[[1]](#footnote-2) It is a text of extremes. Surely, it is a text of hyperbole? Surely, Jesus doesn’t want us to sell *everything* we own in order to obtain eternal life? Surely, Jesus doesn’t mean *that.*

Maybe. Maybe not.

When the man runs up to Jesus at the beginning of the story, he asks him a big question, “Good Teacher, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” There are two things to note here. First, the man thinks that eternal life is only about doing. What are the steps, Jesus, that I must take to do this thing?

The second thing is the man thinks that eternal life is something to be inherited. This might not seem like a big deal to us, but if we think about what it means to inherit something, we realize that we don’t typically do anything for an inheritance. An inheritance is something that is given. The man in this story has a little bit of an upside down view of what eternal life is.

Jesus begins to answer the man’s question by deflecting attention away from himself and toward God. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Then, he goes on to list some commandments. Pay attention to these. There’s something pretty interesting about which commandments Jesus chooses.

“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.”

Why did Jesus pick these specific commandments? If we remember back to Moses bringing the tablets down, we’ll remember that there are 10 commandments written on two tablets. When Jesus is answering the man’s question in today’s text, he highlights the commandments on the second tablet. Why are these the ones he chooses to highlight?

For Jesus, eternal life is communal. Jesus yokes life in God’s eternal presence with communal justice. Eternal life with God will be without violence, without jealousy or theft, without lies and mistruths. In the kingdom of God, *all* of humanity will be honored.

The man is (quite understandably) confused. “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth! I’ve never murdered anyone or defrauded anyone. Is that it? Is that all I have to do? I must be good to go then!”

But then Jesus looks at the man with love in his heart. Because he knows that this man, while he has led a pretty good life, as far as his ethics go, still has one thing that is holding him back from eternal life. Seminary professor Scott Bader-Saye writes, “To love the man, Jesus must tell him the hard truth, that his wealth is in his way. So Jesus invites him, as an act of love, to unload his burden, to give away his wealth, to free himself from that which has come to bind him, even though he has no idea he is so bound. This is love. This is the truth — and it is hard to hear.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Jesus tells the man, “You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Jesus offers the man a chance to store his treasure in heaven and then to catch a glimpse of what eternal life will look like here on earth. Following Christ and his disciples, walking with him, learning from him, and working to re-order the system of justice around them, will give him a foretaste of what eternal life with God is.

Teacher, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life? Go. Sell. Follow.

Where the man was focusing on eternal life and what happens next, after death, as a sort of item he can cross off his to-do list, Jesus redirects the focus to life now, among other disciples. Life together is what the kingdom of God is about.

Later on, after the man leaves, with his head hung down, the disciples try to understand just what Jesus was getting at. Jesus tells them that for mortals, it is impossible to enter the kingdom of God. But for God, all things are possible.

Peter gets a little upset with Jesus at this point, which I just love because I *get* Peters frustration. He says to Jesus, “Look, we have left everything to follow you!” It may be that the man who approached Jesus earlier had too much stuff, but not the disciples! They literally threw their nets down and followed Jesus without even saying goodbye to their families. What more could be required of them?

Jesus replies by telling them that there is no one who has left his house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for [Christ’s] sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age — houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions — and in the age to come eternal life.

One commentary writer says, “It is important to note, first, that entering the kingdom of God is a larger concept in Mark than merely ‘getting into heaven after one dies.’ The Greek term often translated as kingdom (basileia) of God has verbal as well as substantive connotations, and thus in many early Jesus sayings it signals a way of being in community in *this* world, more than a place in the hereafter.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Life in the beloved community, the koinonia as John says it in his benedictions, doesn’t begin when we die. It begins here and now, Peter. Look around. Behold your family.

And the family that Christ brings together is unique for the disciples. It will be larger than they can imagine and it will be ordered differently. In verse 29, Jesus lists the family members the disciples have left behind — brothers, sisters, mother, father, children. And then in the next verse he lists the family members that the disciples will get back one hundredfold — brothers and sisters, mothers and children. The fathers are missing. This might strike us as incredibly odd and uncomfortable. Jesus’ omission of fathers in the new kingdom is not an anti-male statement. It is an anti-patriarchal statement.

Austin Seminary professor Bridgett Green describes this new family system saying, “the community does not replicate their old life, including social and political standing. Rather, the community is family reimagined, with new friendships and resources…For this new community, the kingdom of God is not constrained by the rules of status, power, privilege, prestige, and human expectations; it is a community where the first will be last and the last will be first.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

At the church where I worked in Memphis, every Thursday night the church offers a brief worship service followed by a meal. The aim of the program is to serve the members in our community who are hungry. For many of the folks who attend, they come each week because there isn’t enough food in their pantries. Or because their meager paychecks couldn’t stretch to the end of the month. Or because they simply have no home to go to and Idlewild is just another routine stop for them throughout their week.

Every week, this unique congregation shuffles into the chapel, shaking hands with each other, many clutching their small cups of ice water, eager to get out of the oppressive Memphis heat. The congregation is made up of old men who have lived in Memphis their entire lives, young mothers with children in tow, people suffering from mental illness, drug abuse, or alcoholism, and members of Idlewild who come faithfully each week to worship and serve. The congregation is often a motley crew.

Dinner is an equally fascinating experience. The guests come in and sit down. They have a prayer, and then the volunteers serve their guests. When I was interning there, I was so impressed with this style of service. I love that the guests are invited in and are served. They are treated with dignity and love — both of which are rarely offered to them outside of Thursday evenings.

On each table during dinner are little prayer cards. The guests are invited to write down their prayers and hold them up. As servers pass by, they take the prayer cards and deliver them to Earle who is a professor of psychology and also the weekly emcee. Earle stands at the front of the room and then reads every single prayer aloud. When Earle starts praying, the room goes silent except for all of the voices rising together to say, “Amen” after each prayer. These prayers that Earle reads are holy, my friends. They cut through years of formal doctrine and formal theology and get to the roots of our faith. They speak the truth about who God is in their lives.

The name of this special Thursday night program is called, “More Than a Meal.” The people who founded More Than A Meal were looking for a program that would do just as the name described. They knew that Memphis had a huge hunger problem and anyone who walks around the church’s neighborhood can see the many people who use the church’s stone steps and archways as their beds. But they also knew that Memphis had a race and class problem. It was had become too easy for church members to walk by their neighbors and ignore their hunger and their pain.

The More Than a Meal organizers wanted to provide something that was more than just another food option. They wanted to have a place that would offer community. By having the congregation serve the More Than a Meal guests, the church is embodying Jesus’ proclamation that the “first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

Over the years, this community has grown to love one another. There have been difficulties, sure. The program has had its bumps and bruises along the way. But there have been so many more great moments in which the things that divide us are stripped away. There was the time that the local judge whose family have been members of the church for generations who has presided over two weddings of More Than a Meal guests. And there was the time that Twin, a Muslim African American man who had been attending for years, revealed to the staff that he was dying of cancer and would the church help bury him according to his Islamic traditions when his time comes? And that’s how the great big church on Union Ave. happened to host its first Islamic funeral.

It’s in those moments, when people are willing to be vulnerable, to have their eyes opened to see who God has brought into their family, not just their immediate, nuclear family, but the greater, wider, more diverse, beautiful, sometimes difficult, always different family…it’s in these moments that we begin to catch a glimpse of how God intends us to live life together — not just in the future, whatever that might look like, but here and now, in Staunton, VA, or Memphis, TN.

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Go. Sell. Follow. Love.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Charles Campbell, Feasting on the Word. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Scott Bader-Saye, Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Shelly Matthews, Feasting on the Gospels. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Bridgett Green, Feasting on the Gospels [↑](#footnote-ref-5)