

# **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

## **Sermon Series: BREATHLESS**

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

### **Terminal Affluenza**

(with thanks to PBS and de Graaf, Wann, and Naylor)

(Mark 10:17-31)

Study #20

**Introduction:** It seemed harmless enough...

Our dog, Scout,<sup>1</sup> is not so old. So, due to the two years long drought, she is quite the novice when it comes to dealing with rain. Our recent storms gave her some good experience with wet weather.

Scout is also inexperienced with raccoons. Thursday evening fixed that.

A pesky raccoon has been rummaging around in our backyard for months and was active around 9pm, Thursday night when Scout happened to be in the yard. Kathy was in the kitchen and heard a ruckus.

Pretty quickly, Scout came running up to the house, her fur standing straight up from head to tail on her jet black body.

Scout had probably wanted to play. Or maybe she was protecting the yard (yeah, right...). Well, after whatever tussle she ran into when she ran into the raccoon, she was loathe to go back to the yard.

You could almost read her mind, *"Well, I thought it would be fun. It looked harmless enough."*

Things that look fun, harmless, and innocent can turn out to have a nasty bite.

And if the image of Scout getting slugged by a wily old raccoon is somewhat humorous, other images aren't quite so cute.

How many times have you heard someone say, after getting seriously burned by his or her own misbehavior, *"I had no idea it was so dangerous."*?

Maybe you can look back over your own life and think of times when you got into trouble for doing something that you thought would be good, clean fun.

In the late 1990's John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor co-authored the book, Affluenza - the all-consuming epidemic, described as an "eye-opening, soul-prodding look at the material excess of American society."

The book examines the spiraling cycle of overconsumption, spending, stress, debt, and broken relationships caused by America's obsession with uncontrolled economic growth at any cost.

We can hear the voices of friends, family - maybe our own, *"Money. It looked like so much fun. Seemed like such a harmless pursuit. And just look at all the trouble it has got us into..."*

Today, Jesus talks about this commonly-held commodity and warns us of its dangers.

*Review last Sunday*

The tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel has been all about the revolutionary values of God's kingdom.

Jesus' words about marriage were revolutionary. Far from being a casual relationship of temporary convenience, marriage establishes a "one-flesh" bond and marriage is for life. Last week we explored the implication of that truth as it related to divorce and remarriage.

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<sup>1</sup> Named in honor of Parker Lee's great American novel, To Kill a Mockingbird.

Then Jesus talked about children. Far from being inconsequential members of society, kids have a lot to teach the rest of us, who have a lot to learn about who will occupy God's kingdom - namely, the powerless, the ineffective, the downtrodden, and the weak.

When Jesus addressed Himself to marriage and to children, He turned the conventional way of thinking about God's kingdom on its head.

The exchanges we will observe this morning between Jesus and a sincere seeker AND Jesus and His disciples show - yet again - the topsy-turvy values of God's kingdom.

He is on the road again. Or, as we would say it in Texas, He is fixin' to hit the road, when He is approached by a man with a question.

#### **Danger Ahead: Affluenza (vv. 17-27)**

#### **Jesus with a Sincere Seeker (vv. 17-22)**

*An eternally pressing question (v. 17)*

Mark doesn't give us much of a description of this man. But we have every reason to believe that he is the same guy who is identified in Matthew as a young man (Matthew 19:22) and in Luke as a political ruler (Luke 18:18). This guy is usually referred to as the "the rich young ruler."<sup>2</sup>

There is an obvious urgency about him. He runs. He kneels. He's not like the Pharisees, trying to trip Jesus up. He's serious. He even addresses Jesus respectfully.

***[17] As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"***<sup>3</sup>

The question is the question to end all questions. It is the most pressing question anyone could ever ask.

And ironically, nowhere else in the Gospels does anybody else ask Jesus this question, this pointedly. Not disciples. Not Pharisees. Not general voices in the crowd. Nobody.

This man was on a quest for eternal life. And he was willing to do whatever it took to get it.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, when a Philippian jailer would ask the Apostle Paul that question (Acts 16, "***What must I do to be saved?***"), Paul's response was immediate and crystal clear, "***Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.***"

Jesus response was provocative because it was sooooo different.

*Jesus' surprising response (vv. 18-19)*

"good" vs "GOOD!"

***[18] And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.***

What a fascinating way to start off an answer. Take one word from the man's address, "good" and turn it into a bone of contention.

The man is using a powerful word more casually than he should. "Good" is weighty. Only God is good.

To say that someone is "good" is to say something HUGE. And Jesus didn't want this guy to miss that the only One really deserving to be called "good" - in an absolute way - was God.

<sup>2</sup> As Mark tells the story he gives fewer details, making his situation more universally applicable.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Dillow - "His words exactly mean what we mean when we talk about going to heaven when we die."

<sup>4</sup> I do not think it is appropriate to lay over top of this comment from Jesus a Pauline theology of inheritance. I believe that the man was interested in knowing how he might live in the presence of God after this life is over.

(At the same time, Jesus doesn't reject the title "good", and the way He handled the word serves not as a denial, but as more of a veiled affirmation of His own deity!)

Jesus does go on to give an answer. But here is where we need to return to the man's question.

He asked, ***"Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"***

This man understood salvation as something to be earned, something merited on the basis of what someone does.

So, Jesus answered in kind.

Here's what you DO

***[19] "You know the commandments, 'DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'"***

These commands Jesus lists are simply five of the Ten Commandments God gave Moses on Mount Sinai fifteen hundred years earlier. They are the second five.

The first five have to do with a person's vertical relationship with God (Have no other gods before Me; Keep the Sabbath; No idolatry....). The second five all have to do with the relationships we people sustain with other people.<sup>5</sup>

You'll notice that one of the commandments, ***"You shall not covet"*** is missing from Jesus' list, replaced by, ***"Do not defraud"*** (i.e. - cheat)" - a particular temptation for the rich.

But otherwise, Jesus gives the man an answer to his question, ***"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"***<sup>6</sup>

We have seen before how Jesus often responded to a question with a question. Here the question is not explicit, but is implied. He lists commandments and the implicit question is, ***"So, how are you doing?"***

This man has a stunningly clear conscience.

*A clear conscience (v. 20)*

***[20] And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up."***<sup>7</sup>

At age 12 a Jewish boy goes through a regimen of training and undergoes a set of rituals. He becomes a "son of the covenant" (*bar mitzvah*). From that point forward he is held responsible for obedience to God's Law.

This man who is speaking to Jesus probably means that he was not aware of any infraction of the Law from that age forward.

Now, this guy probably wasn't in tune with the far-reaching implications of some of these commandments as Jesus explained them in the Sermon on the Mount. (anger = murder; lust = adultery).

We might call him superficial, accuse him of not being reflective. He's not thinking of internal purity; just external conformity to a code.

But as far as specific rules of conduct, he had kept them to the letter to the extent that he could recall.

In other words, to Jesus' earlier comment, ***"No one is good but God alone"*** this guy might have added, ***"Well, don't forget me."***

<sup>5</sup> By appealing to the second half of the Decalogue Jesus is showing that relationships with those around us are the discernible measure of a man's reverence for God and obedience to the mandates.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus' answer actually echoes the Old Testament teaching that the man who obeys the Law will live. Deuteronomy 30:15-16 - keep the commands and live.

<sup>7</sup> In light of the man's soon-to-come claims, Jesus' caution against using the word "good" lightly was prescient.

He is confident that he has done nothing wrong, but he isn't yet convinced he has been good enough to inherit eternal life.

Jesus took a minute to study this rich, young ruler.

*Jesus' follow-up (v. 21)*

Jesus loves him, this we know (v. 21a)

***[21a] Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him...***

He saw earnestness. There was no hypocrisy. Jesus reacted strongly to hypocrisy wherever He found it (see Matthew 23), and there is nothing but love flowing from Jesus to this man here.

It's important for us to know that Jesus loved him so that we won't think that what He says next is to put the man off, to frighten him, or to force a rejection.

I think Jesus would have loved to have had this man as His newest recruit for the kingdom. What Messiah wouldn't want him on His team?

So, in a final answer to this eager man's spiritual hunger, Jesus lines out what he must do to have eternal life.

Raising the bar (v. 21b)

***[21b]... "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."***

No matter how you slice it, those words are surprising.

They are surprising, on the one hand, because scribal regulations in the first century forbade a man from giving away all of his possessions because that would reduce him to poverty.

After all, you can only give away all your possessions to the poor once. If you retain your possessions you retain the ability to make income off of your possessions and to help the poor again and again and again.

It's also surprising, though, that in answering a question about inheriting eternal life (i.e. - going to Heaven), Jesus doesn't utter the words *grace* or *faith* or *trust* or *believe*.

But if Jesus' words are surprising, they are as clear as a bell.

He didn't challenge the man's claim to have kept the Law. We almost expect Him to say, "*Aw, come on...*" but he doesn't.

He just raises the bar - way past whatever the Law of Moses would have required! - and calls this man to make a one time gift of all his possession to the poor, followed by an immediate following of Jesus into a brand new future.<sup>8</sup>

The end of this story shows the tragedy of a man's rejection of Jesus.

*Walking away (v. 22)*

***[22] But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.***<sup>9</sup>

Sad and grieving, the rich, young ruler is the only person mentioned in the Gospels who was invited to follow Jesus and refused.

And the reason for his decision to not follow is made explicit. He owned much property and he wasn't willing to abandon his financial security for treasure in heaven.

*Reflecting on Jesus' dealings with this man...*

Now, what do you think Jesus was doing here?

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<sup>8</sup> He is also being invited to join the communal life of the disciples, a call as clear as the calls He made to Peter, Andrew, James, John, Matthew and the rest of the twelve.

<sup>9</sup> This is the first indication Mark gives us that this man was wealthy, a landholder. No doubt Jesus knew it all along.

Was He really giving this man a way to inherit eternal life by mega-works?

I think Jesus was doing something else? I think that Jesus was saying, *“If you are going to play the ‘works’ game, OK. Let’s play it all the way.”*

And He raised the bar to heights he knew the man wouldn’t scale  
TO BRING THE MAN TO THE END OF HIMSELF.

If the man was going to come to God on God’s terms, he had to come to the point where he would say, *“I can’t.”*

Jesus wasn’t giving the man something to shoot for. He was out to prove to the man that works is not the way to approach God, period!

*“Friend, you’re not ‘good,’ as you think you are. You are spiritually bankrupt. Just look at the way you responded to My challenge. You won’t even trade silver and gold and a few acres of land for eternal riches. How foolish. How short-sighted. How self-centered and prideful. How sinful.”*

But this man wouldn’t go there. His riches had a death grip on him. So he simply turned on his heel and left, weeping as he went.

Now we’re going to explore in a bit what this all means to us, today, but I want to continue to track the story as Mark tells it.

The story doesn’t end with the rich, young ruler walking away.

After he walked away, Jesus turned to His disciples, looked at them in much the same way that He had looked at the rich man and spoke words that must have shocked the twelve.

## Jesus, with His Disciples (vv. 23-27)

*Riches and heaven* (vv. 23-25)

Riches make it tough! (v. 23)

***[23] And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!”***

Remember that in Jesus’ day, wealth was regarded as a sign of God’s great blessing. (Job 1:10; 42:10; Psalms 128:1-2). If you were wealthy, it was because God smiled on you. In fact, contemporary rabbis considered poverty the most severe affliction.

And Jesus turned this valuation on its head and completely contradicted the general wisdom of the day.

Here, He says that possessions, far from being an advantage, far from giving somebody a head start on the road to heaven, are actually obstacles. Wealth, says Jesus, is a serious handicap for any person who wants to enter the kingdom of God.

We are not amazed then, when we read that ***[24] The disciples were amazed at His words.***

To help them understand what He was saying, to clarify, Jesus did not soften, but hardened His position. He has just said that it really hard for a rich person to have eternal life.

Now He says that it is impossible.

Riches make it impossible! (vv. 24-25)

***[24] The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! [25] “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.”***

The disciples were first taken aback by the undiplomatic way Jesus had dealt with the rich young ruler.

Thinking that he would have made an excellent 13<sup>th</sup> apostle, they listened as Jesus raised the bar so high that this sincere young man couldn't get over it.

We can only imagine the thoughts rolling around in their heads and the emotions they must have been feeling when Jesus goes on to flatly say that a rich man can't go to Heaven.

And, without question, that is the point of the word picture of the camel and the eye of the needle.

Have you heard the explanation of this, suggested by some, that there was a small pedestrian gate in the wall around Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle"? It was made for human foot traffic, not for animals.

Well, if you had your camel with you, the camel could, by kneeling down and squeezing in after the load was taken off its back, barely make it through "the eye of the needle" gate.

While this explanation (actually, this "explaining away") is enticing, there is not a shred of evidence that such a gate ever existed in the wall around Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus was definitely talking about a literal camel and a sewing needle. And He used the vivid image to underline the impossibility - not just the difficulty - of the salvation of the rich.

It's supposed to sound ridiculous.

And if we thought that the disciples were amazed and confused before, NOW they are **"even more astonished."**

*Head-scratching disciples (v. 26)*

**[26] They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?"**

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<sup>10</sup> The first time this explanation was attempted was in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD.

In addition to bewilderment, you may have just picked up on a note of fear. And the fear is due to their understanding of who was more likely to get in good with God. The rich!<sup>11</sup>

If the rich CANNOT be saved, then nobody else - certainly not us!  
- has a chance.

Well, at the moment of their greatest angst, when the twelve were wondering who, if anybody, might make it into God's kingdom,<sup>12</sup> Jesus' reply brings them - and us - to a consideration of salvation on God's terms.

Salvation is, after all, ultimately not about what we might do - be we rich or poor. It is about what only God can do.

He looked at the twelve as intently as He had just looked at the rich, young ruler before He spoke.

*Salvation is of God, not us! (v. 27)*

**[27] Looking at them,<sup>13</sup> Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."**

Money and entering into eternal life (being saved)

Here's the problem. The rich man and the disciples have all been considering salvation from the side of "*What can we do?*" Jesus says, "*Nothing.*"

Fortunately, what people cannot do, God can.

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<sup>11</sup> In Jewish society it was generally taken for granted that wealth was to be welcomed as a mark of God's blessing. Rabbis like Hillel and Akiba who rose from obscurity and poverty to wealth and influence are commended without embarrassment.

<sup>12</sup> Their sense of angst over who could be saved if the rich couldn't be saved was a helpful grace from God. Something had to drive them away from trust in their own abilities to the One who would be their Savior.

<sup>13</sup> Three times in this passage, we are told about Jesus "looking" at people.

There is an ancient understanding of what Jesus meant by what He says here. This understanding is reflected in commentaries and was even inserted into the biblical text by scribes living in the first couple of centuries after Jesus' death.

The "sense" of Jesus' words is that those who TRUST their riches will not enter the kingdom of God. That is not exactly what He said. But I am convinced that it is what He meant.<sup>14</sup>

And the reason He left the statement so bold and blunt is because of how overpowering is the temptation on those who have material wealth to trust that wealth.

Are rich and poor on an equal footing before God, both lost in their sin without Jesus? Yes. Are both saved by faith alone in Christ alone? Yes.

Is it more difficult for a rich person to come to faith than a poor person? Yes.

By the standards of the first century world in which Jesus lived, most all of us here today would be considered wildly wealthy.<sup>15</sup> And there is nothing wrong with being so (as long as our wealth was honestly earned).

But while riches may look innocent and harmless, like raccoons in my backyard, they are dangerous.

- Riches can give a false sense that everything is OK.
- Riches can deceive someone into thinking that they are self-sufficient.
- Riches can convince someone, like they did the rich, young ruler, that their riches are evidence of God's favor.

Jesus didn't commend poverty as the best of all possible ways to live.

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<sup>14</sup> The manuscript evidence gives us fair assurance that the words "how hard it is for those who trust in their riches" are not in Mark's original text. But scribes from the earliest centuries inserted those words, not to make the reading easier, but to reflect what everyone understood Jesus to mean.

<sup>15</sup> "Wealth" is relative - most everyone in the West today would be wildly wealthy compared to most people of Jesus' day and to most people in the world at large.

But He did often say things like, "***Blessed are the poor***" and "***Blessed are the poor in spirit***" - because those who are poor know that they can't make it on their own.

The poor have to depend on others to survive, and can easily transfer their trust from people to God. So Jesus blessed the poor who, because of their poverty, are aware of their neediness.

Jesus was clearly sad about the rich, young ruler departing and rejecting His offer to follow.

He clearly wants His followers to NOT trust riches.

So, in Peter's mind, it is obviously time to say something...

### **Lost and Found... (vv. 28-31)**

#### **Peter's Claim to Fame (v. 28)**

***[28] Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You."***

(Yes, Peter. You did leave your nets and boats to follow Jesus. Good for you. And... you still had access to them after you started following when you needed to go across the Sea of Galilee. And you still owned your home in Capernaum. So, while you left everything, you didn't LEAVE everything. And you sure didn't do what Jesus was urging the rich, young ruler to do.)

Implied in his statement is the question, "*So, what's in it for us? Do the sacrifices we have made count for anything? Are they ultimately worthless?*"<sup>16</sup>

As Jesus speaks, we hear Him affirm, the great, giving heart of God. We learn, again, that God is an eager rewarder.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew actually included Peter's explicit question on this point.

### Jesus' Affirmation (vv. 29-30)

*[29] 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 farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, [30] but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life.*

Sure, persecution is listed along with the blessings of multiplied extended family and friends and even material riches. So the Christian life is neither utopia nor an insurance policy against hardship - in this life.

But this is Jesus' promise that God knows how to reward those who give up anything for His sake with super-abundance!

We will give things up for Jesus. And then He will give us things we would have never imagined would be ours.

There will be abundance "here and now" AND "then and there" for any sacrifice we make for Him and His kingdom, here and now.

### Conclusion:

So, what do we do with what Jesus says today about money and its dangers? We must beware of the dangers of money! It makes a wonderful servant, but a terrible master.

In another place - in the parable of the sower and the soils, Jesus warned that riches can choke out the good seed of the Word (Mark 4:19).

The Apostle Paul wrote that the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

So despite the overwhelming temptation to do so, don't place your trust in riches. Don't trust:

Your paid off mortgage	Your money in the bank
Your good, safe, secure job	The cars that run so well
Your well-stocked pantry.	

It can all be gone in a flash - and it will eventually rust and rot.

The only One worthy of your trust is Jesus. The only valid place to put your trust for LIFE - abundant and eternal - is in Him!

And having placed our trust in Jesus, how do we protect ourselves from the soul-deadening epidemic of affluenza that is sweeping our culture?

One word: Give.

The fight against the love of money's damage is best waged by choosing generosity.

In Jesus' Name, give to help those in need. Give to support the spread of the Gospel, worldwide. Give to support the ministries where you are fed and supported.

Generous, sacrificial giving is a drainplug to your greed AND it feeds a vibrant trust in God.

And if I read this passage correctly, learning to trust God rather than our riches is also the route to travel if we want to experience the abundant life Jesus promises. (see John 10)

We will never regret giving anything up or away for Jesus. He assures Peter and us that all sacrifices made for Him will be more than amply rewarded.