

Money Can't Buy Me

Mark 10:17-31

"Money, so they say, is the root of evil today
But if you ask them for a rise its no surprise
that they are giving none away." (Roger Waters of Pink Floyd)

There have been many memorable quotes about money. Lennon and McCartney wrote "I don't care too much for money for money can't buy me love." Spike Milligan said "Money doesn't buy friends but it certainly buys a better class of enemy."

On a more serious level Jacques Ellul, a French Christian Sociologist, said last century "Money, which allows us to obtain everything material progress offers (in truth, everything our fallen nature desires), is no longer merely an economic value. It has become a moral and ethical standard."

Of course he is right. Think about the current milk debate. What defence is used for the milk price, it is good business, regardless of the social cost to the farmers. In an episode of *Boston Legal*, lawyer Alan Shaw memorably said "All that is needed for evil to succeed is for good people to say "It's a business"."

Time has become money, "priceless" simply means expensive, we are no longer people but consumers, we are to spend and save, but save what or who?

In the midst of all these quotes, we have the shocking one in our reading today "Go, sell what you own, give to the poor, and follow me." How do we respond to this?

How are we as Christians to think about money? Our Gospel passage today will raise at least two common Christian response, but will also cause us to consider "Money can't buy me ... "

I wonder.



CHRISTIANS SHOULD BECOME POOR (10:17-22)

Our passage starts with a man eagerly, animatedly running up and kneeling before Jesus asking. "Good teacher. What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Here is a man who wants to be part of God's future, part of God's kingdom. He knows that there are many people giving a variety of answers, the Pharisees, the Essenes and so on and he wants to know Jesus' answer.

This helps us understand Jesus rather odd response about no one being good but God. Jesus is pushing this man to see that the issue is not what Jesus or anyone else may say, but what has God already said. "You already know the commandments" and he reminds him of a sample.

The man answers, we assume with complete sincerity that he has kept all these from his youth. Jesus seems impressed, we are told that Jesus looks with love at him and then says those terrifying words " sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Christians should become poor

For much of Christian history this verse has been used to say that Christians should become poor, and we can think of the monks of the Middle Ages with their vows of poverty as examples.

There are more modern examples of Christian groups that insist that members sell all their possessions. Often this is from unscrupulous leaders, false prophets looking for false profits, who say "Give all your possessions to me, be poor and follow me" but this is certainly not what Jesus said.

But many pious people throughout Christian history have thought that poverty was the Christian ideal. Mother Theresa could say that her poverty was her freedom. Are they right? What are we to do with this verse? It is verse which makes us very uncomfortable, but we can't ignore it, but we do need to understand it.

Response

Firstly, we need to note that the disciples reaction to this whole episode is one of amazement, indeed growing amazement. This suggests that this was the first time they had heard Jesus say this despite the fact that they had been with Jesus for quite a while by this time.

Secondly, while we couldn't say that Jesus was rich, we also couldn't describe him as destitute. Jesus had supporters like Mary, Martha and Lazarus who still had possessions. These two factors would suggest that this call to sell everything was not Jesus normal call to each person he met.

What was a stake here was the man's heart. Jesus initially doesn't mention all the commandments, those about putting God first and coveting are not dealt with, but they are firmly put on the table with his final demand, and he fails the test, because, we are finally told, he had many possessions. He may or may not have known that money can't buy him love, but money had certainly bought him.

This verse then is perhaps not as terrifying as it first seems, it is not a once for all demand that we give all that we have to the poor, but it is a reminder to us that our hold on them must be light in the face of God's kingdom and God's call. Could it be that financial concerns stop us from whole heartedly following God. When faced with a decision between the way of God or the way of business in a crisis which way would you jump. Money can't buy me ...? I wonder.

A problem for us all

But once we realise the Jesus is tailoring his call to this man out of his love and concern for him, this passage becomes if anything more terrifying. This is an uncompromising call to discipleship. If Jesus were to be looking at us in love and call us to follow him what would he ask us to let go of?

Give up your career, your collections, your respectability, your sex drive, your religious traditions. All of those would be idols that would stop us putting God first as we should. It is a question we cannot dodge.

CHRISTIANS WILL BECOME RICH (10:28-31)

If we are not to become poor are we to become rich. A bit later in our passage Peter, as usual the spokesman for the group says "Well, what about us, we have left everything to follow you." and Jesus says "Whoever has left the things of their life for my sake and the gospel will receive a hundred fold in this life..."

Rich Christians?

This verse and a few others have lead to another approach that says actually Christians will become rich, following Jesus is seen to be a good investment with a guaranteed return. This is very popular in the USA and in some churches in Australia and is often referred to as Prosperity doctrine. The pastor of the Hillsong Church in Sydney wrote a book called "God wants you to have more money." Can't get clearer than that really.

Well there is some truth in this. For some people, to start living by Christian values will mean that their standard of living improves. I had a friend who used to be an alcoholic and he used to say "I don't know about water into wine but Jesus certainly changed beer into furniture for me." Christian living may lead to a better attitude to work and a more careful use of money so the Christian faith can certainly have financial beneficial results for us.

But the idea that God will reward us financially in this life for our faith is clearly out of step with Biblical teaching, and certainly the example of Jesus, and conveniently ignores the warning about persecution in the passage.

The focus on this verse is clearly not on individual enrichment but on a new community far more rewarding than what had been given up. The aim of the early church was not that they should all be poor but that there should be no poor among them. Jesus followers lived out what Francis Bacon said "Money is like muck, not good except it be spread." Richly generous is the issue rather than generally rich.

CHRISTIANS SHOULD TRUST IN GOD (10:23-27)

Yet we have not got to the heart of the matter, to put it into financial terms the bottom line.

As the rich man walks away Jesus said "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God." As we have already seen the disciples are amazed at this, as riches had been seen to be part of the blessing of God in the Old Testament. Then as now to be rich meant to be able to open doors not to find them shut or hard.

Jesus goes on to say that it is actually difficult for anyone to enter, yet especially hard for the rich, using the humorously ridiculous example of the camel, the largest animal in the country, through the smallest hole, the eye of a needle. The issue is not just that it is difficult, it is impossible.

This raises the question for us as it did for the disciples, "Who then can be saved?" How can anyone enter into God's Kingdom? Jesus replies that what is impossible for man is possible with God. What Jesus is forcing the disciples to realise is that entry to the Kingdom is not based on our social standing or our net worth, even how good we think that we are. It is dependant purely on the grace of God and all we need do is recognise our need.

In the passage immediately preceding our passage today Jesus said that "anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." It is when like children we humbly and willingly accept God's gift in Jesus that we inherit eternal life. We inherit because we become God's children, so we have sure treasures in heaven. It is in humbly receiving that we get what we cannot lose and is worth all that we cannot keep.

This is where it is particularly difficult for the rich because wealth tends to engender pride and self sufficiency, in need of no one, that we have the resources to face any difficulty. We see this perhaps in the man's question, "what must I do?" With such a mind set it is much harder to recognise what God has done for us. And when faced with Jesus call even an earnest man forgets what is infinitely more important. Can you entrust yourself to God, have you?

CONCLUSION

The primary call in this passage ultimately then is not about money but about trusting God and following Jesus. But it is in following Jesus, in looking to his example that we will be best taught what our attitude to money should be: he gave abundantly of all that he had; he gave generously from that which the Father gave him; he gave sacrificially to the point of death for our sakes.

With such a model we are encouraged to give abundantly, generously and the most difficult, sacrificially. We may give generously but do we notice it, are we left within

our comfort zone while others are still in need. If our money says don't give me away, it will hurt, who is really in control? You or the money?

When we give sacrificially we show where our true priorities lie. Sermons can be copied, prayers can be faked, the Bible can be head knowledge but it is often in our cheque book that the testimony of our love for God and our neighbour can be written loudest.

"I don't care too much for money cause Money can't buy me ... ? I wonder.