

**21st Sunday After Pentecost (Series B)**

October 18, 2015

Gospel: Mark 10:21-31

Epistle: Heb 4:1-13 (14-16)

Lesson: Eccl 5:10-20

Psalm: Psalm 119:9-16

**CLB Commentary: Pastor Bruce Hillman****Text: Mark 10:23-31****OUTLINE OF COMMENTARY:****A. CONTEXT OF PASSAGE****B. MAIN POINT****C. ANTINOMIANISM, LEGALISM & LAW AND GOSPEL****D. EXEGESIS: VERSE BY VERSE****E. APPLICATION: HOW TO PREACH IT****A. CONTEXT OF PASSAGE**

*Broad Context:* It is always helpful to review the overarching themes found in Mark as a whole before zooming into the text we are preaching on for the week. These broader themes both situate and contextualize the specific verses we are exegeting and prevent us from reading any given text as though it was not part of a greater work and servant to that author's argument.

Why was Mark written? To show that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who ushers in the anticipated Kingdom of God and that one should answer his call to follow after him. This following-after, or discipleship, functions as a template for salvation by grace. One must follow Jesus which includes repentance, baptism and belief (1:15). Jesus consistently teaches that entrance into the Kingdom is difficult (10:15; 10:25). Mark's Gospel is the only one of the four to call itself a "Gospel" and this is appropriate since perhaps more than any other gospel Mark is interested in his reader's response. How does one hear the call of Jesus in their own lives? Will they follow after him or remain distracted by earthly comforts?

This hope for a reader response helps make sense of Mark's abrupt ending. Perhaps surprisingly to modern readers, Mark does not provide any first-hand, eye witness accounts to the resurrection<sup>1</sup> even though the women arrive and see the tomb empty, in Mark's account they do not see Jesus. It is now widely accepted that Mark originally ended his book in 14:8 and this matches the data in our manuscript collections. The addition of 14:9-20 is most likely a later redaction, and I adopt this view. It may be important to ask why later editors thought an additional ending necessary? Perhaps the best answer is simply that Mark ends on a rather foreboding note, "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

But this ending is precisely what Mark has been building up to. We leave the book of Mark with a sense of “now what?” and he has effectively merged us readers with the disciples of that Easter morn. Having heard that he is risen, what will we do? Will we follow after him or will we say nothing? The whole time we have been reading about Jesus and the disciples but now the “then” and “now” merge in a manner that can only evoke us to question, “Now what will I do?”

This is not reading too much into things. Mark is relatively easy to figure out from a narrative perspective. He spends 1/3 of the book in the Passion. Everything points towards and to the Passion account. A brief outline of the book can be done in only three movements, **Chapters 1:2-3** give us a brief introduction to Jesus and then move quickly with little detail through stories of Jesus as an exorcist and miracle worker. We sense Mark’s impatience in getting us to the Passion. He uses the word, *euthos*, or “immediately” 47 times in his gospel. **Chapters 1:14-9:50** are Jesus’ Galilean ministry in Northern Israel which acts as a sort of bridge with miracles performed for both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus spends a lot of time here preaching about the gospel. **Chapters 11-15** all take place in Jerusalem. Mark spends only a few sentences on many of Jesus’ miracles and sayings but spends 5 chapters on Jesus’ last two weeks! This, and we know nothing from Mark about his first 30 yrs!<sup>2</sup>

This leads us to the major themes in the book: The Kingdom of God and Discipleship. Mark 1:14 says that Jesus came, “preaching...the gospel of God” which is immediately followed by, in 15, “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Gospel and Kingdom are not synonymous, but nor are they separable. Mark has much to say about the Kingdom (4:1-34, 9:1,47, 10:14-15, 23-25, 11:10, 12:34, 14:25, 15:34). The Kingdom, as Mark uses it, is made up of the King and his disciples. The disciples are given the secret to the Kingdom and to be a disciple is to take up the call to follow Jesus and be like him. Discipleship is imitation, but more than this, belief. Repentance is from sin but also from competing loyalties like wealth and family. Mark wants you ask yourself, “Will I take up the call to go, and follow him?”

*Local Context:* Our pericope is 10:23-31 but this is a somewhat artificial break just like the chapter divisions. It is best to see our text functioning as part of 17-22 where we get the story of the Rich Young Ruler.<sup>3</sup> While we will still focus for preaching purposes on the text at hand, we do well to see the, local context and how that functions to give meaning to our pericope.

The story of the rich young ruler fits Mark’s broad themes, it is a call story. <sup>4</sup> It is the only call story in Mark where the response is “no”. It is not accidental that the “no” is in response to the subject of finances, proving itself one of the greatest threats to discipleship and salvation.

In essence, the story functions to test the limits of discipleship, how far will someone go to get eternal life? There has been much psychologizing of the Rich Young Ruler, some seeing him as haughty and prideful for his use of the honorific, “Good Teacher” and others seeing in him a genuine desire for perfection in doing God’s will. His motive doesn’t really matter for the story’s function. The story is a deep condemnation of placing hope and trust in anything other than God with a specific warning against money.

It is important here to not make the mistake of spiritualizing our passage too much. In the history of interpretation this text has undergone a continual loss of literalism that has rendered it almost passive and degouted it of its offensive and truly shocking claims. For example, many people read this text and say something to the effect that , “Well, Jesus isn’t speaking against money per say, he is dealing with this specific person’s situation. Obviously he doesn’t mean we all need to give our money away.” But is this really true? Interestingly, the patristic and early interpreters of this passage saw this text as functioning almost exclusively that way. In Acts we see the sharing of property and money even if, by the time of its writing, the ethic was beginning to wane (Acts 5:4). For early Christians who saw Christ’s

return as immediate or very soon, long-term planning didn't come into the picture. Rather, finances were like tests of discipleship, provoking the holder to be used for the good of the Kingdom where their gift in this life would be considered a loan for the next and where the rewards of the Kingdom paid significant dividends.

But Jesus didn't return right away. And when the thought of his immediate return was no longer pressing, these texts had to be reevaluated in terms of their applicable function. Later, and through the Middle Ages, Mark 10 began to be seen as literal (you do have to give up everything) but not for everyone. Instead, these texts functioned for monks, nuns, priests or anyone else who was given a "special calling" or holy office. Development of the "vows of poverty" arise from this tradition. By time you reach the Reformation period in the twilight of the Middle Ages and as the Enlightenment's sun begins to rise, the text loses almost all literalism and becomes almost completely spiritualized. The text no longer meant that you have to give up all your money, or that anyone else does (like those called to a special office) instead, the call to give up everything financial was said to be given *only to the rich young ruler and his specific situation*. Even Luther remarked, in his *Sermon on the Mount* that, "Having money, property, land, and retinue outwardly is not wrong in itself. It is God's gift and ordinance." This increasingly de-literalizing the text's call to give up one's fortune, whatever that may be, suspiciously evolves as Western Christendom increases in wealth and, by Luther's time, capitalism begins emerging. This is not just true of Christianity. Even Jewish tradition begins to take this turn with rabbis arguing that one should not give more than 20% of their income away so that they would not become destitute and depend upon others in a burdensome way. This has all the trappings of Jewish wisdom and modern "stewardship" sensibilities. But how does it fit with, "Take no gold, silver or copper in your pouch, nor any bag for travel, nor a second cloak, nor sandals, nor a staff. A workman must deserve to be supported" (Mt. 10:9-10)?

The idea that Jesus has any neutral view of money is indemonstrable from the biblical texts. Jesus is consistent in his negative teaching about money (Mk 4:19, 10:22, Mt 6:19-34, Lk 12:13-32, 16:1-15, 19:1-10). In a direct contrast to this chapter and our text this week Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Lk. 6:20)—a direct challenge to the rich who find entrance impossible without God's help. When Jesus does speak positively about wealth it is never earthly riches but the treasures of heaven given as a reward for those who toil for the Kingdom here and now. Even Luther picked up on this negative sense of wealth being used in the bible when he taught that, "rich" in the bible ends up having negative connotations largely because it is generally reserved for those characters for whom wealth is their primary concern. Abraham and Job are not identified as "rich", though they have many possessions, because it is not their most noteworthy characteristic. But the "rich man" though he thinks of himself as pious, is in fact wicked because of his self-serving attitude towards wealth."<sup>5</sup>

So what are we to say about Jesus' teaching on wealth? Are we really called to give up everything, all our money? The answer is simple and "yes." But there is a context to the "yes." In Mark 10:13-16 Jesus says that entrance into the Kingdom necessitates childlike faith. Children are not concerned with money because they neither fully understand it nor have use for it. They simply take love and provision for granted, believing their needs will be met each day. Adults, however, know the importance of money and the work required to earn it. They also understand its power and influence. Jesus's view on money is not neutral but negative. We do a disservice to our congregants when we teach the call to give up all of one's wealth for the Kingdom is applicable only to the specific situation of the Rich Young Ruler. The fact is that we are called to give up every hindrance to following Jesus. Peter will say it well in our text, "See, we have given up everything and followed you!" This includes family, home, place, wealth and familiarity. If we object to the call to give up all our wealth we often find it is indeed a hindrance, and like the Rich young Ruler the demand finds us sorrowful. But the call to take up the cross (MK 8:34) is call to loose one's life. That is the cost of discipleship. But on the other side of death is death's defeat, and behind the shame of the cross lies the glorification of the saints.

I said earlier that this was a call story with a "no" response. The call is simple. Jesus says, "Go, sell, give, come."<sup>6</sup> The man cannot because his wealth competes with his discipleship.

We too are given the call to give up everything we have, even our wealth. A childlike faith depends on God's grace to provide needs<sup>7</sup>. But if we repel at this and spiritualize it or make it applicable to others and their situation, we not only lose the force of Jesus' words, but the lesson. Ironically, if the call to give up all our wealth is not received negatively but with joy, the requirement no longer holds. But this is not true of most of us, exactly because Jesus knows the power of money over our hearts and hence the teachings on money are not neutral but negative. We must admit, despite our objections, money is spiritually very dangerous.

This raises one more important question. If we are called to give up all of our money and live truly by grace, and if we find this to be a hard or impossible teaching, then is there no hope for us? Can we be disciples?

Indeed we can. Our text today functions both as a Law and Gospel text. The Law says you must give everything up to follow Jesus. But the Law cannot produce what it requires. Hence Jesus' Gospel word that while it is impossible for rich people (or those who won't give up all their money) to follow God, all things are possible with God. Grace, not works, will be the characteristic ticket into the Kingdom. Grace will emancipate the curse of the Law—but it will not remove its demands. Discipleship is never devoid of obedience even if it births from grace. We will talk later about the paradox of Law/Gospel living, with a meditation on the danger of antinomianism and legalism that a preacher of this text can fall into. For now, it is sufficient to remind our hearers that wealth is negatively, not neutrally, defined. It is a great threat to discipleship.

## B. MAIN POINT

The main point of the text is that discipleship requires total and complete obedience and that this obedience is not possible without God's graced intervention. Specifically, wealth or riches are used as the example of how easily we assume we are really following after Jesus, all the while having things—like family commitments or wealth or whatever else we feel we have to have—that we are not willing to give up. We are particularly good at reasoning out and justifying with a convincing “wisdom” why God would never be as radical in calling us to what the text literally says.

Although capitalist economics were just beginning in his time, Luther had the foresight to see that it is all too easy to justify our wealth and greed by telling ourselves narratives of supposed wisdom so that we rarely push beyond the limits of what we think is “reasonable” in following after Christ: “Greed nowadays has come to be viewed as talented, smart, careful stewardship” which has the end-effect of, “sin in general [being] dressed up to look like virtue and not vice.”<sup>8</sup> Ever hear that? Something like, “God wants us to be a good steward and so you shouldn't give so much that you go into debt.” Debt is indeed bad. But it is interesting that we all become “good stewards” when we find the demand of discipleship too high. We have no problems buying ourselves ipads and new cars, the latest fashions and extra books, but then we say, “Whoa now, God wouldn't call me to give *everything*, that would be irresponsible.” And in so doing we show the limits of our discipleship are bounded by greed and the use of reason—as if the Kingdom operated on the bases of common sense?<sup>9</sup> Kathryn D'Arcy Blanchard gives particular sting when she says, “TV viewers in Minnesota can, while eating their dinner, see live footage of dying famine victims in Sudan... what Christians do with their money is indicative of what they believe about God.”<sup>10</sup>

Our passage today wants to both *affirm* the ethic of total and radical obedience to Jesus and his call to follow after him and *absolutely communicate the impossibility of that call without the grace of God through the Gospel*. The challenge will be to avoid two extremes both of which make the meaning of the text spurious and wrong. On the one hand one can preach this text as an affirmation of works righteousness telling everyone that they have to give more because this is the cost of discipleship. This can leave hearers not only oppressed but victims of the false assumption that sacrifice

equals currency (merit) with God. On the other hand there is a danger in preaching grace antinomistically so that God's affirmation of grace in the Gospel functions to undermine any real call to sacrificially follow after Christ. One must be careful here as this text can easily fall into either polarity and can produce both fear or arrogance. I feel the necessity to deal with this polarity with an extended comment on Law and Gospel.

### C. ANTINOMIANISM, LEGALISM & LAW AND GOSPEL

Lamar Williamson Jr. was particularly helpful to me in tying together the two apparent contradictions of Law and Gospel, obedience and grace in this chapter of Mark:

The relationship between 10:13-16 and 10:17-27 is one of contrast. The principle has been established (10:15) that one must receive the Kingdom like a child. In 10:17-22, not only the rich man's question but Jesus' answer focuses on what one must do. The material in 10:13-16 seems to depict entering the Kingdom as easy and deplors any hindrance to it set up by the disciples. In 10:23-27 Jesus twice says, "How hard!", and then adds, "with men impossible... but not with God." These last words transform the contrast from contradiction to a paradox. Entrance into the Kingdom of God, or eternal life, or salvation, so far from being easy, demands our best obedience and all we have. Yet all we can do is not enough to achieve the life we seek. Such life and wholeness is possible only for God, and we can receive it only as gift. Jesus' blessing of the children (10:13-16) can be read as cheap grace. Jesus' call to the rich man (10:17-22) can be read as works salvation. Jesus' teaching to disciples (10:23-27) draws gift and demand together in a paradox that is astonishing but true. 11

This idea of paradox is helpful to me. There is a paradox within Law and Gospel insofar as they are practically lived-out and experienced. While it is easy to understand what Law is (the commands of God, the eternal will of God) and what Gospel is (the grace of God, the final verdict of God through Christ) the preacher is often lost between a world of competing objections. If he preaches too much Law without Gospel, it is said he falls into legalism and moralism, code words for works-righteousness. But if he preaches too much Gospel without Law he slides into antinomianism which devalues the Law as the eternal will of God, code words for cheap grace. That is not too hard to understand theoretically. But in practice a good preacher is always worried if he is doing it right, of where he is erring. Recent trends in evangelicalism and popular Reformed movements have (rightly) stressed grace. But this well-intended stress on grace has (in my opinion) often slid too far into antinomianism by less careful preachers. And both the legalist and the antinomian are often unaware of their error (you don't hear of too many teachers proud to call themselves either a legalist or antinomian). Which is only to say that both legalism and antinomianism are more like the toad in the pan than deliberate choices. That makes them very threatening, and also means it's easier to throw out accusations at preachers who, in reality, are doing it right, albeit not perfectly (can any of us?)

Texts like ours that offer the paradox of the full demand of the Law through obedience while also showing the necessity of divine grace, offer a particular challenge (and opportunity) to get things right. How do we preach paradox? Can we preach the necessity of total obedience to Christ while also preaching its possibility only from Christ, and can we do all that while neither (functionally) negating the Law nor moralizing discipleship into a works-currency? To do so would require a more careful distinction over what Law is, *not* what Gospel is. Most people engaged in this struggle agree about the Gospel, what it is and what it does. The dispute is about the Law and its use and function.

Timothy Keller is helpful in showing that both antinomianism and legalism stem from the same basic error about the Law. Keller thinks the issue is more fundamentally on how the Law is construed as operative:

We are prone to think of these two [legalism and antinomianism] as opposites. If we do, we will instinctively and unwittingly try to heal the one with a dose of the other, and that can be lethal...legalism stems from the belief that we will have to pry blessings out of God's begrudging, unwilling fingers with all sorts of observances and performances...Antinomianism assumes the same grasping, ungenerous, and hard God, whose commands cannot be seen as given for our benefit. In both cases the Law of God is viewed not as an expression of his gracious love for us but rather as a burden, a necessary tool for mollifying an unloving deity... the only difference between the two is that the legalist assumes the burden wearily, while the antinomian refuses it and casts it off.

But both see God in the same light... [what this means for your preaching is that] if you think legalism is simply too much emphasis on the law, then you will think the antidote is to talk less about obedience and more about acceptance and forgiveness. If you think antinomianism is simply too loose an attitude toward morality and law you will assume the remedy is to talk less about mercy and acceptance and more about God's righteousness and holy commands. If short, you will try to cure one with a dose of the other. That will be a disaster, because both of them have the same root cause. Both come from the belief that God does not really love us or will our joy, and from a failure to see that "both the law and the Gospel are expressions of God's grace."<sup>12</sup>

So how do we preach the paradox? Firstly, we must be as clear about what we mean by "Law" as we do by "Gospel." And inevitably we must, as Lutherans, understand the Third Use of the Law as the Lutheran Confessions use it (which is different than Reformed and of which we do not have time to distinguish).

But even more basically, we must see the Law as comprised of two distinct aspects. Sometimes this is called the distinction between the Law's "office" and "essence"—a distinction Luther himself made<sup>13</sup>. The "office" of the Law is its job, what it is tasked to do. The Law accuses sinners and condemns them as guilty, needy and depraved, evil, enemies and rebels of God, children of Satan. The "essence" of the Law is its nature, or its character and personality. The Law is good. More specifically it is good because it expresses the objective will of God. I contend that this is where the slide into antinomianism more often happens. Antinomians, or those who have antinomistic tendencies, often conflate or ignore the essence of the Law for the office. The converse is true for legalists or moralists.

According the Lutheran Confessions, the Law is the eternal and objective will of God (this is its essence) yet for sinners the law functions to condemn (its office). We may liken this to a prosecutor who's office is charged with winning a guilty verdict over the accused. The prosecutor herself is good for she is an agent of the government for social order, even though her job is to accuse and find guilt. With God's Law the issue is beyond simple social order<sup>14</sup> for the Law is also the eternal and good will of God. That means that the Law must always be preached because it is always the will of God. It also means, because we are all sinners, that the Law will only ever function to accuse and condemn. The question is, what is the use of the Law for Christians? Can the preacher preach "to do's?" Can he tell people they "must do" certain things and must live a certain way? If people are not doing these things, can he call them to repentance and question their salvation? Yes. Unquestionably yes<sup>15</sup>. If he did not question their salvation, the Law's accusation would be worthless. The answer to the fear created by the Law's accusation is the Gospel. "You mean, if I don't love my neighbor I can go to hell?" "Yes that is exactly true, you have spoken rightly." "But I can't love my neighbor." "But you must." "I try but I fail." "Yes. It is impossible for you. But there is One who was obedient and He has loved all his neighbors. He has died in your place and His righteousness is yours." This is a bit reductionist of course, if not a bit old fashioned in style, but it is neither legalism nor antinomianism.

In Christopher Jackson's article *Losing Luther*, he says:

Gilbert Meilaender, in an essay entitled "Hearts Set to Obey" (Dialog, 2004), remarks that contemporary Lutheranism presents a static account of the Christian life. While Catholicism presents a "linear" framework in which the Christian journeys in progress toward holiness, Lutheranism posits a "dialectic"<sup>16</sup> one which precludes any self-perfecting tendencies. In this view, "Christians make no progress in righteousness; they simply return time and again to the word that announces pardon, a word that invites and elicits faith."

This understanding "eventually arrives at a kind of practical antinomianism," for in this framework God's Law loses any power to guide the Christian in a more holy Christian life. "The normative will of God [is] of purely passing significance" so that "what the church has to say increasingly mimics the secular sphere both in what it accepts and in what it rejects."<sup>17</sup>

Jackson goes on to say that, "The merely dialectical approach to Lutheran theology severed itself from a significant part of classic Lutheran theology."<sup>18</sup>

The Law, because it is God's eternal decree and good, must always be preached. And it must terrify so that it can bring repentance. The Law cannot function as a mere wet noodle, an (ironically) legalistic add-on to a Gospel sermon only to be immediately undermined by Gospel proclamation. The Gospel only undermines the Law when the Law truly accuses and frightens. If you have any doubt of this simply read the Formula of Concord, VI. "The Third Use of the Law", where the old nature still alive in regenerate Christians is called, "an intractable, refractory ass [that] still is a part of [believers], and must be coerced to the obedience of Christ, not only by teaching, admonition, force and threatening's of the Law, but also oftentimes by the club of punishments and troubles, until the body of sin is entirely put off." The Law is effective post-conversion because we are simultaneously sinner and saint. To the old Adam the Law always accuses, to the New Man, the Law sets the standard for free and good works.

The Formula says we need the Law to instruct us in good works so that we do not, (falsely) believe that certain behaviors are good which in fact are not. For example, "Human beings this side of the eschaton must have God's commandments clarified and taught to them so that the sinful nature does not tempt them into self-chosen works, which are a particular problem in the church of our day, with the move toward both church political activism and the acceptance of homosexual practice. In both cases, the church's full proclamation of the law and its work as a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 2-3) had been sidelined for other concerns."<sup>19</sup>

The paradox of Law/Gospel preaching must have a good understanding of the Law with a fearlessness to preach it. At the same time, one must not allow reason and inference to empower hearers to a truly impossible task of works righteousness. I think we mustn't soften the demand of the Law (You must do...If you do not you are guilty), even post-conversion. So to speak of a difference in the work of the Law is not really accurate. The Law's function (office) is always to prosecute. The confusion lies in that the essence of the Law is received differently by the New Adam and the Old. To the Old Man the Law is always a terror, to the New, it still accuses but the terror is gone and the Law functions to define good works.

Mark 10 shows this paradox. God both demands the work of the Law and condemns those unable to do it. Like the disciples we cry out, "Then who can be saved!?" And it is at this place the Gospel comes to fruition in the proclamation: "With men impossible...but not with God." This paradox both keeps the demand of obedience-the call of the disciple to give up everything, to take up the cross and follow Jesus into poverty and death, while still announcing its impossibility and need of grace. What we are left with is a sanctified call to do our best, to strive and struggle to meet the eternal will of God (the Law) with a rich net of grace (the Gospel) to support and contextualize our efforts. This makes our post-conversion good works free of coercion for we are not trying to earn God's respect and good graces (this is the new man in us, supported by the Spirit and free of the Law's coercion). But it doesn't mean the Law ceases to terrify because it functions to compel us to do God's will, even if in itself it cannot bring about obedience (because the old man is still a part of us too and needs prosecution).

Summing up, preaching the paradox of Mark 10 allows preachers a chance, particularly in this text, to harass the old Adam in us and call us out. We are too caught up in consumerism and greed to want to hear the call to follow Jesus requires total poverty and self-abandonment. At the same time, the new Adam in us is empowered to take the risk of generosity because he is awashed in grace and confident in the faithfulness of God to provide our needs. God's act of incarnation, death and resurrection display His commitment to sinners. The cross stands as the ultimate promise that God is on the side of sinners.

#### **D. EXEGESIS: VERSE BY VERSE**

**Vs. 23-24:** Jesus's comment that it is difficult for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God follows his observance of the Rich Young Ruler's exit from the scene. We may lose the force of Jesus' comment except that Mark gives us the detail that the disciples were astonished. What is the cause of this amazement?

As is often the case Jesus is upending long-standing cultural wisdom. Judaism had long had a history of interpreting wealth as a sign of divine favor or blessing. This “health and wealth” understanding ran very deep and had Scriptural support (Job 1:10, 42:10, Ps. 128:1-2, Isa 3:10 etc.). The idea is alive and well today and is nothing but works-righteousness. The Jewish belief was that good works had merit. A righteous man would be given Divine blessing in the form of wealth as a testament and witness to their standing before God. The poor were not seen as conversely unloved or punished (that role went to the sick) but as God’s beloved and under his care and protection (Deut. 15:17-11; Prov. 22:22). When Jesus declares the difficulty of the wealthy getting into heaven, the disciples are shocked. If they can’t get in then who can? It would be as if a person said that Mother Theresa or the Pope or the missionary martyr would not get into heaven. If they can’t get in, what about the rest of us? Jesus is condemning works righteousness. But recall he does this as a response to the Rich Young Ruler’s disobedience. The paradox of Law and Gospel we saw earlier is operative.

The amazement of the disciples leads Jesus to call them, “children.” Though the Greek word used here is different than earlier (*brephe* in 10:13 and *teknon* in 10:25) the concept seems to be the same. Just as little children must be open and willing to trust their parents, so too the disciples must be like children to receive this hard saying and have the humility that allows Jesus to save them. Indeed the saying is hard, it is a second reiteration that shows both clarity and emphasis that entrance into the Kingdom of God is difficult. We tend to forget this sometimes, that, without Jesus the Kingdom is something in our vision but out of our reach.

**Vs. 25-26:** Jesus states the famous analogy that camels can pass through needles easier than wealthy can pass into the Kingdom. The disciples offer the appropriate response, “Then who can be saved!?” which shows they understand that entrance into the Kingdom is but impossible. Camels *don’t* go through needles.

It is a false legend that in Jerusalem there was a gate named “camel’s eye” that one could crawl through. No such gate ever existed and the earliest record of such a story appears late in history. No archeological evidence or existent manuscript from the time confirms any such notion. Also, via Calvin and others who believed the word camel should be translated “rope” we now have sufficient evidence to show this is not the case, “camel” is correct.

The image is powerful because the only way a camel could go through the eye of a needle is to cut it up and force it through. That would kill the camel (of course) and make the attempt worthless. The rich, or anyone who depends on their own righteousness, simply do not have the wherewithal, the constitution or ability to fit in the narrow doorway of the Kingdom. “Who can be saved!?” is the proper response to this Law analogy. The Law says, “You must do this!” We say, “But we cannot!” And indeed this is true.

**V. 27:** Jesus responds to the disciples’ question by saying that with man it is “impossible.” He confirms their fears and leaves no doubt—a camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle and a sinner cannot, by merit, get into the Kingdom. But the Gospel shines through where merit fails, “But with God all things are possible.” God will do what man cannot do and make the camel pass through the needle. This is not fathomable to us, but God can do the impossible.

This statement on God’s power, particularly a salvific power, is telling. For God is the God of miracles and possibilities. This does not mean that God always acts to make the impossible possible, nor does it mean that all things that can be conceived are possible with God. It is not possible that God could sin, lie or break a promise. The “all things” situates itself within the self-disclosure of God; God can do all things that God can do. God can make possible all impossibilities but “possibility” assumes actualization and “impossibility” assumes futility. To say something is impossible does not mean it is unimaginable, it’s simply to say the imaginable cannot be actualized. God can make all things actualize that can be actualized, however absurd the actualization. God cannot make all that is imaginable or conceived possible

since much of what is imaginable is sinful and opposed to the self revelation and character of God. All this means that when God makes the impossible, possible, he acts in accordance with his own character and manipulates the laws of nature and time to his will. God's act of salvation is won in time on the cross. But the incarnation, the death of God, and the resurrection all are impossibilities to human reason and logic. But God thwarts our wisdom with displays of power. Particularly this power is manifest in saving and loving sinners. So neither wisdom (Gnosticism) nor merit (works) can bring one into the Kingdom.

**V. 28:** When you think of it, this is an odd statement by Peter. Jesus has just gone out of his way to express the impossibility of entrance into the Kingdom by human effort. He has said that only God can make this impossibility possible. But Peter's statement seems to harken back to the Rich Young Ruler. He denied Jesus by choosing his money over true discipleship. Peter, in contrast, reminds Jesus of the cost discipleship which the disciples have all borne. Peter appears to have missed the point, is he relying on his merit?

Probably not. Peter's statement may not be perfect but it does show his understanding. The Rich Young Ruler denied the invitation (call) of Jesus in 10:21. There, Jesus promises heavenly riches for self-emptying and generosity. Peter's response is that he and the 11, unlike the Rich Young Ruler, have been obedient to the call of discipleship. This again is our paradox. On the one hand Jesus makes clear that entrance into the Kingdom is impossible with human effort. But God's grace that makes the impossible, possible does not negate the call of obedience. Since the Law is God's eternal will, it does not change when we convert to Christ. The Law still says, "This is what good works are, this is what you should strive to do."

**Vs. 29-31:** The cost of discipleship is laid bare. People will leave homes, countries, families and friends to follow Jesus. But their sacrifice is not unnoticed by God. He does not ask them to give up their wealth and comforts here without reward later. This reward is not meant to appeal to our greed but to our fear. Jesus is not trying to motivate his followers to obedience and sacrifice by appealing to their greed and promising them a wealthy life. Rather the "hundred-fold" reward is meant to comfort and reassure them: God will restore and return to them all they have lost. In other words while discipleship is costly ("persecutions" in verse 30) it does not bankrupt. The sacrifices and investments we make here as we take up the call of discipleship are returned later with added interest.

Finally, Jesus ends the passage with, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first." This saying is used in other places and its placement here is debated. It seems clear the phrase is used to sum up the teaching thus far in the passage. But what does its use mean to convey to us here? Does verse 31 connect back to the promise Jesus gives to the disciples in verse 30 or as a warning to Peter (and the 11) that while Peter is right in what he has said about the disciples personal sacrifices, he need be careful this does not lead to pride? Is 10:31 a prelude to the teaching in 10:43-44? Or, what is most likely the case, is this Jesus' way of summarizing the entire teaching on discipleship that began in 9:30? This is the view I think best and allows us to hold our paradox in which obedience is both necessary but non-meritorious.

#### **E. APPLICATION: HOW TO PREACH IT**

A danger with this text is that hearers will not relate to the wealthy who's entrance into the kingdom is impossible. When Jesus spoke this to the disciples they were amazed and said, "then who can be saved!" Their response, as we have seen, births from a long-standing tradition of "health-and-wealth" existent in first-century Judaism. "If the righteous cannot enter the Kingdom, then what about us!?" is their response. This is the tension the text creates and preachers should take time to make this tension real.

While it is true that the health and wealth heresy is alive and well today, most of our LB churches do not contain a majority of adherents who believe this (though they may believe that suffering is a punishment for their sins?). Many

are still reeling from the Great Recession and few congregants feel wealthy. Statistics that Americans are in the 1% of the world's wealthiest people and have one of the top-three best standard of living often fall short of making an impact because within every tribe there are the haves and have-nots. We compare ourselves to our immediate context, not to a context that is out of sight, mind and proximity.

But even if they are not among the wealthiest locally, many Christians think they are morally better than others because of their works. They might volunteer on the worship team or run the local soup kitchen. They may organize the annual festival or serve on a church board. Volunteerism is hard work that often requires real sacrifice and deep commitment. It can be easy for pride to swell heads and hearts without even knowing. And soon people begin to look down on others who don't give as much—or—feel they have greater authority in the church because of their generosity of time or treasure.

These people are rich in good works. But they find their identity in them. Can you say to the old man who's sang on the worship team for 30 years that the church wants to go in a new direction? How will he feel and what will be the fallout? Will he graciously step down for the good of the church or will he step down hurt and angry by the request? Following Jesus is not just a one-time sacrifice, it requires constant cross-bearing.

To those who would be hurt by such a request we can be very empathic. But we can see a bit of the Rich Young Ruler too. The impossibility of the camel going through the eye of the needle is offensive. To the kind old saint who lent his voice for 30 years leading worship the request to step down and let others come up is hurtful. But Jesus goes even further in his analogy. He says, in essence, "All your 30 years of singing in the church mean nothing. You have no rights or privileges because of it. The Church owes you nothing." And like the disciples we say, "But if the old man's works mean nothing, what about mine!?"

And the response is, "Your works earn you no points, but my Son's work gifts you everything." If you believe in salvation by faith alone through grace alone, then that has to mean that everyone who is saved is saved by miracle and that everyone who is saved stands equal at the foot of the cross.

Where is the justice then? Is this Communism? Do the lazy just get carried along, subsidized by the hard-working? Such questions are framed all wrong. Peter's acknowledgment of the disciples' hard work and sacrifice show that those who sacrifice for the Kingdom will be repaid by God. Their works are not worth-less but nor are they meritorious. They do not earn points with God, they points with the person, compounding heavenly treasure, protected in God's storehouses so that our earthly generosity can increase.

Congregants need to be shown both the demands of discipleship and the grace of God. Christ did in fact do the impossible. He was eternally wealthy but gave up his wealth, he was eternally free, but constrained himself to a human body (which he never sheds), and he was forever happy, but on earth he wept. Though tempted, Jesus kept the Law.

And we are to be like him. So congregants need to be reminded of the dangers of wealth and feigning "responsibility" or "stewardship" as an excuse to be ungenerous. And they need to feel the danger in finding their identity in their works. A sermon rich in Gospel grace but void of the call to take up the cross can actually backfire, playing on the carnal heart as license as Luther observed:

Under [the rules] of the papacy people were charitable and gave willingly; however, now under the Gospel no one gives anymore... And the longer one preaches the gospel, the deeper people are submerged in greed, arrogance, and sensuality, as if the poor beggar's pouch is to survive here forever. So completely has the devil taken hold of people."<sup>20</sup>

So we must not be afraid to tell our hearers, “This is what God requires.” At the same time, what is impossible for them is possible with God. God gifts his righteousness to us so that we can follow him. Without that grace following him would be a futile endeavor!

A text like this is a wonderful way to both call people to repentance and awash them in grace. For our salvation we rely on Christ alone, and that frees us from performance anxiety or an identity crisis. Instead, I can take up my cross and follow him knowing that my salvation is secure in him and my works help manifest his will into the world.

1 The “young man” in the resurrection account is traditionally ascribed to be an angel, but there is no proof of this, however likely. But even here the young man does not say what he has seen (testimony) but proclaims victory over a promise fulfilled, “He is not here, He is risen just as he said.”

2 It is interesting to note that if Mark was the only gospel we had we would not know how old Jesus was.

3 Mark does not call him a “ruler” but Luke does.

4 Williamson, Jr. Lamar. *Interpretation: Mark*. John Knox Press. 2009. pg 183

5 Blanchard, Kathryn D’Arcy. *If You Do Not Do This You Are Not Now A Christian: Martin Luther’s Pastoral Teachings on Money*. Word and World, Volume 26, No. 3. Summer 2006.

6 Williamson, Jr. Lamar. *Interpretation: Mark*. John Knox Press. 2009. pg 186

7 A question might be raised, “what about being responsible?” Certainly the bible calls us to be responsible. But responsibility cannot function as an excuse to deny the demands of discipleship. To be a disciple is to follow the Master and to let him teach you what responsibility is.

8 Klug, *Complete Sermons*, as found in Blanchard pg. 303

9 see I Corinthians 1:18-31, 2:1-9

10 IBID 308

11 Williamson, Jr. Lamar. *Interpretation: Mark*. John Knox Press. 2009. pg 185

12 Keller, Timothy. *Preaching*, Viking Press. New York, NY. 2015. pgs. 52,54-55

13 Kilcrease, Jack. *Gerhard Forde’s Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique*. *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. January/April. 2001. Vol. 75:1-2. Pg. 155. “Holding these two aspects of the law together [office and essence], therefore, is the only logical solution in light of Scripture and the confessional tradition. In fact, Theodosius Harnack more than a hundred years ago attempted to hold both aspects of the law together in Luther’s thought by suggesting Luther made a distinction between the “office” and “essence” (*Amt und Wesen*) of the law. Though in the present age of sin and death it is the office of the law to accuse and condemn sinners through the mediums of God’s created masks, the law is nevertheless also a positive good, which expresses the eternal will of God for human beings. Contra Robert Schultz who disagrees with Harnack, Kilcrease posits, “Based on the evidence that we will see below, there is a very least a strong suggestion that Luther did make such a distinction. In any case, even if he did not literally use the distinct terms “essence” and “office” as terminology [like Schultlz], conceptually the distinction appears to

be present. Luther for example, did not use Christological terminology such as “*genus maiestaticum*” either, but conceptually he affirms what Chemnitz and Lutheran orthodoxy meant by these terms.

Per Luther’s usage see Kilcrease. Kilcrease gives some minor Luther references and adds, “If the law did exist before the Fall, then Luther must have believed that the law had an existence apart from its condemning effect and the ensuing sense of human existential dread. This would also suggest that Luther defined the law in an identical fashion to the Formula of Concord, where as we noted both aspects of the law are held together.” IBID

14 The Law still does this in the unregenerate Kingdom on the Left by providing a level of social order.

15 One of the ways to make sense of the difficult texts like I John 2:15,b, “If anyone love the world, the love of the Father is not in them” or similarly I John 4:20 or even James’s “Faith without works is dead” (Js. 2:14-26) is to realize that John and James are using the Law to speak to the Old Adam. He still needs accusation and guilt. This helps us come to daily repentance.

16 “The late Gerhard Forde forcefully presented this dialectical approach in the “Radical Lutheranism” that he proposed. Forde argued that there are only two kinds of religions or theologies: theologies of glory (almost all theological systems) and theologies of the cross. Theologies of glory are those which aim to perceive God’s divine attributes as they shine through in the good, true, and beautiful. He argues against all such theologies in that they attempt to set up a “glory road” to God, a way of self-reliance toward righteousness and holiness.

Opposed to all these theologies of glory is the theology of the cross, in which God through the cross ends all attempts at self-justification so that sinners might despair of themselves and thus embrace God’s justification of them.”

17 Jackson, Christopher. *Losing Luther: First Things*. Online. 9.10.15. <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2015/09/losing-luther>

18 IBID

19 Kilcrease, Jack. *Gerhard Forde’s Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique*. *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. January/April. 2001. Vol. 75:1-2. Pg. 177

20 Luther as found in Blanchard pg. 305