

## **Well That's Rich!**

### **Mark 10:17-31**

#### **Introduction**

What gives your life meaning? Where do you find your identity? If you were to think about where you spend most of your time or what dominates your thinking then that will help you consider what gives your life meaning or where you get your identity.

For many parents much of their time and energy is given to keeping the family running smoothly whether it be on a school day or going to sporting or social activities on the weekend.

For people heavily involved in the work force, and particularly in the world of business, work can become all consuming. If you think that I'm overstating things by saying that there is a strong link between something or someone being integral to a person's identity and the person's life having meaning, consider that there is a noticeable rise in suicide figures for men upon reaching retirement. Retirement should present people with the opportunity to relax and enjoy greater freedom and connection with people. However, men in particular are susceptible to finding their identity in their workplace and their productivity. When this is taken away from them through retirement their lives lack meaning and when a life no longer has meaning, what's the point of continuing?

If you can determine what gives your life meaning or where you find your identity, it can help you to know what is most important to you. Not always, but often, that which gives our lives meaning and identity is that which is most important to us and also what we value most. This morning we're going to consider how Jesus helps us think about this.

Now for the sake of clarity, I'm going to talk about the person Jesus speaks to as the rich young ruler. Matthew, Mark and Luke (what are called the synoptic gospels because they all look at Jesus mainly from one perspective) all include this story and all describe the man as rich. Matthew includes the information that the man was also

young and Luke tells us that he was a ruler. Put all that together and you have the rich young ruler.

### A Miss-Spoke Question (v. 17-20)

So then, let's look at Mark 10 and the story starts at verse 17, where the rich young ruler rushes up to Jesus with great enthusiasm but perhaps not a great deal of self-awareness.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good – except God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother."' 'Teacher,' he declared, 'all these I have kept since I was a boy.'

This man is genuinely enthusiastic. He runs up to Jesus in a culture where running is not common, if not downright frowned upon. The man recognises Jesus' authority by kneeling before him and then uses a title for Jesus which sounds really minor to us, "Good teacher," but which was not used by Jewish people because of the reason which Jesus goes on to point out, Good is something which can only truly be attributed to God.

Now, I'm only going to mention this in passing because it's not the focus of this story but some of you will know that Jehovah's Witnesses, who don't believe that Jesus is Emmanuel, God dwelling with humanity, love a verse like this where Jesus appears to point away from himself as being God. To quickly address this consider a few things. In only the previous chapter we've had the transfiguration where Jesus' deity (his god-ness) shines through and Mark has consistently presented the authority of Jesus and his identity as God's Son who acts with God's power and authority.

But why does Jesus say, "Why do you call me good? No one is good – except God alone." The man who has come up to Jesus, the rich young ruler, is very enthusiastic but is perhaps not thinking particularly deeply. I think Jesus' answer is for one, or

maybe both, of two reasons. First, maybe this man is always a little too enthusiastic. It's like watching Rugby League and listening to the commentators say, "This guy is a legend of our game," to then have a different player described as, "This guy is an absolute legend of our game," only to be informed about another player that, "This guy is a dead-set absolute legend of our game." And so the superlatives accumulate and you start to wonder if the word "legend" really has any meaning any more. One possibly for Jesus pulling up the rich young ruler is because he wants him to think about the words that he's using and to not use important descriptives loosely. The second reason is related to this and that is it may be an almost ironic correction from Jesus saying, "Do you really identify me as God? Are you ready for the implications of that?" Either way, I don't think this question or correction of Jesus is intended to deny that he is Emmanuel, God with us."

Turning back to the passage, what was the man asking? 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' The rich young ruler might be a little loose with his words but his enthusiasm isn't wrong and neither is his question. This man wants to know how he can be a part of the kingdom of God and that's a great thing to be enthusiastic about.

At this point Jesus asks how the man is going in relation to the law, "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.'" And to this the man replied, "'Teacher,' he declared, 'all these I have kept since I was a boy.'" What's interesting is that Jesus doesn't say, "Mate, your deluded! There's no way you have been so good." Jesus just accepts what the man says about his behaviour.

Now, let's just pause for one moment. Here is one of the blessings that comes from going through a book of the Bible in order. What was the story just before this one that we looked at last week? In verses 13 to 16 we have the story of Jesus receiving and blessing little children and saying in Mark 10:15, "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Last week we

considered that receiving the kingdom of God like a child meant acknowledging weakness and dependence. In all the gospels which record the story of the rich young ruler, they all place it immediately after Jesus' receiving of the children.

It would appear to me that we have here another enacted example of Jesus' teaching like we've had elsewhere in Mark. Jesus asks about how the man has gone in relation to the law because it creates an image for us of a man who is quite capable of fulfilling what God requires on his own merits. This man has kept the law since he was a child. He doesn't need to receive the kingdom of God like a little child ... does he? Little children, almost invariably, find their identity and life meaning in their parents. Where does this young man find his identity?

### Cutting to the Heart (v. 21-22)

Jesus, as he so often does, cuts to the core to reveal what gives the rich young ruler's life meaning and where was his identity. It wasn't in Yahweh or his kingdom. Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

The rich young ruler's identity was in his wealth. Money and possessions gave this man's life meaning. While he may have been willing to identify Jesus with God in calling him "good teacher" he wasn't willing to truly submit to God and find his identity only by following Jesus.

There are some tremendous lessons both for us in how we relate to God as well as for us as a church in the way we connect with others. First, notice that while Jesus is very available (this man had run up to Jesus and spoken to him while Jesus was moving on but Jesus took the time to speak to him) but while Jesus is very available he is also uncompromising in the standard that he calls people to (there is to be nothing, absolutely nothing, which is to have a greater allegiance in our lives than him). Here in our church we should work hard at making sure we have as few barriers to people coming into our midst as possible (we shouldn't use jargon, we should use

music that is appropriate, we should make it so people feel welcomed, etc.) and yet we must never compromise who we are as a community that is formed by and for Jesus (we don't change our belief in miracles in case secular people find it difficult to believe and we don't change God's call on our lives to be changed because it makes some people uncomfortable). So the first thing is that Jesus is freely available to all but has an incredibly high and exclusive calling.

Second, you can love someone and still disagree with them and even not accept them. This is hard for us to hear because we're so used to being told that Jesus accepts you just the way you are. But he doesn't. Jesus loves you just the way you are and he's willing to forgive whatever sin you have done but if you refuse to trust him and submit your life to him then, no, he does not accept you. If you believe that you can do enough to earn your place in the kingdom of God rather than admit your need and receive the Kingdom of God freely like a child, then you can not enter the kingdom at all. Likewise, for us as followers of Jesus we should not believe the lie that says that if we as a church love someone we will simply accept what they do. No, we are called to express Jesus' character and that will sometimes mean humbly pointing out when something is wrong or unacceptable.

Third, Jesus will let you walk away from him. Jesus loved this man and yet was willing to let him walk away. Bishop Spong, a priest in the American Episcopal Church (the Anglican Church) deeply loved his daughters but when they couldn't accept the Jesus they read about in the Bible, Bishop Spong wrote various books re-interpreting who Jesus is to make it so his daughter would accept him. It is completely correct for us to love others and for Bishop Spong to love his daughters and yet it is terribly wrong for him or others to simply change who Jesus is so that others are willing to accept Jesus. When we do that we betray Jesus, we say that others are more important than Jesus and ultimately we are no longer bringing people to Jesus but just bringing them to someone we've imagined or created.

## The Need For God's Action (v. 23-27)

I'm running out of time and so I'm going to need to speed up. Let us look at the next section.

Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?'

Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'

Jesus says that it is impossible for the rich to get to heaven. While some people have tried to say that the word 'camel' is referring to a large rope or that the 'eye of a needle' was a hole in a city wall, there's practically no evidence for this. Rather, this is actually a known phrase at that time to describe an impossibility. The camel was the largest animal commonly seen in Palestine and the eye of a needle was a well known small item. To confirm this, when the disciples then ask with some amazement, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus makes clear that he is describing an impossibility for people but God is able to do the impossible.

So then, with it clarified that this is describing an impossibility, listen to the disciples' response when Jesus says that it's impossible "for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." In verse 26 we read, "The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?'" Notice that the disciples didn't say, "Wow! Good thing we're not rich!"

In the Old Testament there is a balance between seeing the rich as sometimes being blessed by God and at other times seeing the rich as those who oppose God by oppressing the poor and trusting in their own wealth, etc. However, while in the Old Testament there is a more balanced presentation, many common Jews in Jesus' time read the stories of Abraham with his great wealth, Joseph and his privileged position in

Egypt, David and his military victories, etc. and saw in the rich God's hand of blessing. If it was going to be impossible for the rich, those who so clearly had received God's favour, to enter the kingdom of God, what hope did anyone else have?

Well, at a human level, there is no hope. Jesus answers the disciple's question, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Why is it that we need to receive the kingdom of God like a little child? Because like little children receiving what they need in life from their parents, so the kingdom of God needs to be given to us. We can't earn it or work for it in our own strength.

This is why the application for us cannot be that we all need to sell everything we have and give it to the poor. If that was what we had to do, then some rich people could probably do that. Some of us may be challenged to surrender our possessions to God because we know that we trust them rather than trust him but it won't be all of us. In the next few verses which close out this section, the people who follow Jesus in this life are not pictured as being destitute but may indeed be blessed physically and relationally.

### Reward For God's Work (v. 28-31)

We next read, "Then Peter spoke up, 'We have left everything to follow you!'" I wonder what prompted Peter's statement here? We know that Peter can well and truly put his foot in it at times but there are other times when he is really quite insightful. Is Peter being a bit boastful again, describing his and the other disciples' sacrifice? Or is Peter almost wondering if God has worked the impossible in them by moving them to follow Jesus and find their life's meaning and identity in the Christ?

The motivation of Peter is not fully revealed but Jesus answers with a word of realistic assurance, "'Truly I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.'"

I say that Jesus answers with realistic assurance because he tells the disciples that they will be blessed with much more, even in this life, than what they have given up and on top of that they will have eternal life. However, Jesus also informs the disciples that persecutions are to be expected in this life as well. This promise of Jesus, while true, should not be taken as some sort of accountant measure of expecting x amount of blessings compared to y amount of persecutions. The simple message is that there are blessings which we will receive as we surrender important things in our lives for the sake of Jesus and the message of the gospel but we should also expect trials and difficulties.

Those of us who have taken steps of faith in surrendering things as we find our identity in Jesus and he is the One who gives our lives meaning, can testify to the truth of Jesus' words here. Some of you know that a young Indonesian lady, Janti, lived with us for around 7 years. God used us in Janti's life and in the lives of her family members too but we were also incredibly blessed by Janti. A few weeks back Janti had a baby boy, Elijah, with her husband, Nino. Ella proudly informed us that because Janti is her big sister and had had a baby that that made Ella and Evie aunties and Alison and I grandparents. And you know what, we'll wear that title proudly.

We love our Australian family dearly and missed them terribly at times while we were overseas but we know the truth that, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life."

I have just come back from a conference of a network within the Uniting Church which seeks to promote leadership development, discipleship, Biblical authority and church planting and renewal. I gave humble thanks and praise to God upon hearing from a number of people at that conference of their connection to the Lockyer Valley and our churches and how families here had shaped their view of God and the church and how they viewed certain families here as a 'second family'.

To all of you who have sacrificed personal time, money, rooms in your home, holidays to help at a church event or camp, quiet Friday nights so the youth group could come round (that's what my parents were always putting up with), meals and copious amounts of coffee and tea, etc. as the pastor here I want to affirm to you that when that has been done for the sake of following Jesus and helping others to follow him, then you will indeed be blessed now and into eternity.

## Conclusion

So what do I say in conclusion to a message that is already way longer than usual?! Let's go back to the opening question, What gives your life meaning and where do you find your identity? Perhaps it's finances and possessions like it was for the rich young ruler or perhaps it's family which Jesus identified at the end?

Then again, maybe something else gives your life meaning. We live in an age when experience is considered by many as giving them an identity; we're told to be "an experience collector." Connected with experience there are others for whom travel gives their life purpose.

Not money or possessions, not family, not experience, nor travel are normally wrong in and of themselves but anything that gives us identity and gives our lives meaning must be surrendered to God and we must find our identity ultimately in Jesus and following him.

And when that feels like a step too far, even an impossibility, cry out to your Father. Cry out like a little child to your Dad who is the God for whom all things are possible, and ask him to do in you what you can't do yourself.

[close in prayer]