

Mark 10:17-31
April 25, 2021

Hope Mennonite Church
Stories from Mark #1

***4/27/21 Here are more selected verses on “righteous/righteousness/right-conduct.” Righteousness is an attribute of God, which “endures forever” (e.g., **Psalm 111:3**; compare **Psalm 35:27-28**). God’s calling of his servant and appointment of Cyrus are acts of righteousness (**Isaiah 42:6, 45:13**). Righteousness is God’s design/standards for a just social system (**Psalm 9:9**); it includes fair distribution of resources to benefit the entire population (not just the elite; **Psalm 72:3**). Human beings can “sow” righteousness and “harvest” steadfast love (human effort); when human beings seek the LORD, God rains down righteousness upon them (divine gift; **Hosea 10:12**). All Scripture is God-inspired and useful for training in righteousness/right-conduct, which Johnson defines as acclimation to the *culture* of righteousness, wherein God’s people are “equipped for every good work” (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**; see L.T. Johnson, *First and Second Timothy*, 421).

Finally, **Matthew 5:6, 10**, the fourth and eighth beatitudes, understand righteousness as ethical, that is, right conduct. This is the perspective of both WGO and D&A.

^{5:6}Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness/right conduct, for they will be filled/satisfied ...

^{5:10}Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness/right-conduct, for they share in/take part in the kingdom of heaven.

God's Impossible Possibilities

Our Scripture today in part concerns **material possessions** ... our **relationship** to them, the **value** we place on them, and the **meaning** they give to our lives.

Our **relationship** with **material possessions** is, of course, very **concrete**. It is.

Mother and father are excited to buy a swing set and playground unit for their young children. They have to borrow a trailer to pick it up and bring it home. It’s in pieces. So, they drive the kids to the grandparents. They return to spend most of the day **assembling**. That includes several trips to the hardware store for specialized tools they didn’t have. They discover that they have to re-level part of the yard so the swing set will be balanced. That takes time. The unit recommends but does not supply sand or mulch or anything for the ground surface underneath, nor any border to keep that material from scattering all over the lawn. So, on another weekend, the kids go back to Grandma and Grandpa, while mother and father add the mulch and border. But several months later they discover that the neighborhood cats ... find the mulch quite accommodating. So, all that has to be removed and replaced. By the end of the season, they need some new parts because they either broke or the growing kids need bigger sizes. And each year the wood components need to be re-sanded and re-

coated with sealant. Now all of this may be well worth it. But it's ***not*** an ***unusual*** example, is it? Many of our ***material possessions*** are ***not*** "once and done." Rather, we have a concrete ***and on-going relationship*** with them. And for this young family, the playground set is only ***one*** of their ***possessions***.

If you're from the sandwich generation, the ***material possessions*** in your life might include your own stuff, your adult kids' stuff, and one or more sets of your parents' stuff. That's a lot of ***stuff*** ... ***and*** a lot of ***stuff management!*** ***Stuff*** is where your ***time*** goes! You thought you had a ***house***. What you really have is a ***storage unit*** ... but I bet you're not getting a check every month, are you?!

Here's what life teaches us: ***We own stuff*** ... ***and*** to varying degrees, ***our stuff owns us***. Oh, yes! And Jesus is straight with us: Our ***acquisitiveness***, our ***attachment***, our ***comparing*** ourselves to what others have, our ***preoccupation*** and ***insulation***, our ***over-encumberedness*** by ***possessions***, has the potential to turn a disciple into salt that has lost its taste (Luke 14:34). []

Our Scripture today is ***partly*** about our ***relationship*** with ***stuff***. But it's about ***more*** than that. It's about our ***relationship with God***.

One day, Jesus is walking along the road. A man approaches him. The man is ***urgent***—he ***runs up*** to Jesus. The man is ***deferential***—he ***kneels*** before Jesus. This is ***serious!*** The man poses a ***question—direct ... personal ... ultimate: What must I do to inherit eternal life?*** Jesus responds that the man ***already knows*** the answer. Isn't that interesting? Jesus says to him *You know the commandments*. Then he mentions several. The man says, *Teacher, all these things I have observed from my youth* (Mark 10:20). Quite an ***achievement!***

This is a person who has devoted his entire life to being ***righteous***—a person who intentionally and diligently obeys God's commandments. That's ***commendable***.

Now in ***Ezekiel 18***, ***God*** describes ***righteous*** people. They are those who do not lift up their eyes to idols ... who do not oppress anyone ... who do not take advance or accrued interest ... who restore the pledge of the debtor [Interesting! How we treat other people with ***money***, when we have

the upper hand—**that's** part of being **righteous!**] ... who commit no robbery ... who share food with the hungry and clothe the naked ... who execute justice between contending parties [the **righteous** help **mediate** disputes!] ... people who follow my statutes and are careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully ... **these** are the **righteous** ... says the Lord God” (**Ezekiel 18:5-9**, selected).

Job testifies to his own **righteous** actions. He mentions care for the widow, the orphan, clothing the poor with fleece from his own sheep, addressing the concerns of his slaves when they have a complaint **against him** (Job says, “Did not the God who made me in the womb fashion my slaves as well?” Being **righteous** includes **some** leveling of the playing field!). Job says **righteous** means **not** putting his trust in money, caring justly for his farmland (“If my land has cried out against me ...!”), **and** making a covenant with his **eyes** not to stare at a young woman (**righteous** means taking personal responsibility for his sexual boundaries; Job doesn't put that on what the woman wears or how she acts. Good for you, Job!). Being **righteous** before God is very concrete, isn't it? Being **righteous** is something **lived** ... **in** the real world ... **in** very specific ways (see **Job 31:1-40**).

Now the Apostle Paul makes a major contribution to this biblical portrait of being **righteous**. Paul knows from his own experience, that even the most diligent striving to be **righteous** is still not enough to **achieve** peace with God. Peace with God **by human efforts** is ultimately **unachievable!** Even the superheroes of spirituality can't do it. But Paul says that's **good** news. Really? Yes! **Because** while peace with God can't be **achieved** it can be **received** ... as **God's free gift**. Paul expresses this with the **passive voice** to describe believers as people **made righteous by God**. So, **Romans 5:1** says, “Having **been** justified (or, **made righteous** ... passive voice), **we have** (!) peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” What is **unachievable** by human effort is nevertheless **attainable**. Now Paul's not discrediting **righteous** behavior. He **is relativizing** it ... **because** ... relationship with God is not like a credit score; it's not determined by the **score** we get on keeping the commandments. It's all about, as **Romans 5:5** says, God's love being poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been **given** to us. So, dear friends, by all means do your best to lead a

righteous life. **But** ... be **even better** at **receiving** God's free gift of being **made righteous** through the **grace** of Jesus Christ. God has given an **impossible possibility** ... **to us!**

And **that** takes us back to our story. The **urgent** man on the road has devoted his life to being **righteous**, and thereby to **achieve** peace with God in **eternal relationship**. The additional information we find out about him ... is that he is **wealthy** ... like Job ... He's got lots of **stuff**. For most people in Jesus' day, wealth was understood as God's **reward** for the **achievement** of **righteousness**. And what does Jesus ask the man to do with his wealth? **Give it away!** It's the **one thing** holding him back. Jesus commands the rich man to **divest** ... **not** to make him **poor**, but to free him from his **achievement-and-reward relationship** with God. We can't get to eternal life even with a **perfect score**. We get there through God's **perfect love**. And **that's** the **one** paradigm shift the rich man can't make. **Sad**, isn't it? It's a tragedy when someone knows what to do to change their life for the better, but won't do it. It's leaves us **sad**.

But it leaves Jesus' disciples **astonished** ... **astonished** ... **because they too** assume that **relationship** with God is an achievement-reward system. And if Jesus tells the **highest** achievers to **give away** their reward, what reward is possible for other achievers? That's what Peter asks: What about **us**? We left everything to be your followers. Jesus' disciples, of course, **don't** have **material wealth**. They **do** have **relational wealth**. So, Jesus addresses **that**, and says, the **relational wealth** that disciples leave behind in order to follow him will be fully compensated with a **community of Jesus' followers**, which is their **new family**. And along with **that** will come **another** kind of "compensation"—**persecutions**—which is quite a redefinition of **compensation**, isn't it? In response to **astonishment**, Jesus gives ... **more astonishment!**

It's not that **wealth** is morally reprehensible in and of itself. It's that accumulateness, comparing ourselves with what others have, competition, insulation, and attachment—they all pile up and clutter our lives. We become like an over-packed camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle. It just won't fit. And who wants to miss the reign of God because they can't squeeze through

the front door? But brothers and sisters, we're children of God, born from above, born to imitate the freedom and generosity of the Father.

And dear friends, the best news of all? What right-relationship with **possessions** teaches us is that all things are not **achievable** with God. Instead, all things are **possible** with God ... because God gives—free of charge—an impossible possibility **to us**.

Scripture Reading Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷Now as Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to him, knelt before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what should I do, so that I may inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? Nobody is good except One, that is, God. ¹⁹You 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." ²⁰The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, all these things I have observed from my youth." ²¹When Jesus looked at him, he loved him and said to him, "You lack one thing: Go, sell what you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²²But the man, because he was appalled at Jesus' requirement, went away demoralized, for he had numerous possessions.

²³When Jesus had looked around, he said to his disciples, "With what difficulty will those who have wealth enter the reign of God!" ²⁴Now the disciples were astounded at his words. But Jesus responded and said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the reign of God. ²⁵It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the reign of God." ²⁶Now the disciples were totally flabbergasted and said to one another, "Who, then, can be saved?" ²⁷When Jesus looked at them, he said, "With human beings that is impossible, but not with God. For with God, all things are possible."

²⁸Peter began to say to him, "Look, as for us, we left everything and have become your followers." ²⁹⁻³⁰Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold, now at this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."