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SERIES: Come In From the Crowd
MESSAGE: The Challenge of Wealth
PASSAGE: Mark 10:17-31
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

Well, it is safe to say that in the history of the world, few, if any countries have been as wealthy as we are. Few countries in the history world have been as wealthy, as rich as the United States. In fact, it might not feel this way, but compared to the vast majority of the people who have lived throughout human history, we, all of us, average Americans, we have far more possessions, we own more stuff, than the vast majority of humans that have ever lived. So while it may not feel like it, the simple truth is that we fall into the category, historically speaking, of the very rich.

Now why do I bring that up? I bring that up because Jesus had some very strong things to say. Jesus said how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Now that raises a big question. Does wealth, does our wealth, create an obstacle in our life with God? That's an important question, isn't it? It's what we need to consider together tonight.

If you have your Bibles, open them with me to Mark chapter 10. Mark chapter 10. We're gonna be in verse 17 to begin, but before or as you're turning there, let me just say that if you're visiting, if you have recently joined us here at Lincoln Berean, you might be thinking these churches always talk about money. Not true. We do, though, talk about money twice per year, in August, and then again in January. And you happen to be here on an evening where we want to talk about what we call our treasure stewardship.

We want to do that through the lens of the theme that we have for the year, this discipleship theme of "coming in from the crowd." We introduced this theme a few weeks ago, comes from Matthew 11, where Jesus looked at the crowd, and in verse 28, we are told that as he looked at the crowd, he then said to them, "come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The call of Jesus to the crowd, the people who were in the anonymity of the crowd, perhaps even the uncommitted comfort of the crowd, to them, a call went out to draw near to him, to come to him, to take up the offer to be with him, to become a disciple of his. And many people took him up on that call.



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Last week, Lane walked us through Zacchaeus' story. Zacchaeus took Jesus up on that very call. Others did as well. Many people responded to that call to draw near to Jesus. Many people did it then, many people still do it today, but we always have to keep in mind, not everyone did. It's always sobering, isn't it, to realize there are large groups of people who have heard that call and have rejected Jesus. Saddens me as I go through the gospels and I see this happening over and over again, and that is precisely what happens in the passage that we're looking at this evening.

I believe this example, this person who did not respond to the call of Jesus, serves as a cautionary tale for us, a warning as we consider what it means to follow him. So Mark chapter 10, verse 17. It's a familiar story, but I still think there are some things in here that will surprise us. Mark chapter 10, verse 17 says:

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?"

Now, there are not a lot of details that Mark here has given us about this man, at least not yet. He will as the story proceeds. But merely by looking at the man's actions and looking at his question, we can learn some things about him. Versus actions, we're told that he ran up to Jesus and that he knelt before Jesus.

Now, I just wonder, in the room, other than exercise, when is the last time you ran? It's probably been a while. Because adults don't run, right? We don't run. We don't now, and back then, adults did not run. This was something that a respectable person would not have done. But that's precisely what this man did. He ran up to Jesus, which tells us that something on his mind, something on his heart, was very urgent. He ran up to Jesus and then he knelt.

Now, same question. When's the last time you kneeled before someone? Probably, maybe, never. I think my last time was about 20 years ago when I proposed to my wife. We don't do this. This was a very odd thing for this man to do. It was a show, a sign, of great respect, great reverence. It's possible that also we can gather that he had respect for Jesus by the way that he addressed him. He said "good teacher," which is a very rare way to address a teacher. We'll come back to that moment.

But then we get to his question. His question reveals the reason for his urgency. He was concerned about eternal life. He wanted to know what he needed to do in order to be saved, to enter into unending life and fellowship with God. So now, how will Jesus respond? Verse 18.

18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, do not commit



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adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother."

Now I have no doubt that Jesus' response shocked this man as much as it probably shocks us. Jesus rebuffed. He pushed back on his address of calling him good teacher. He says, now, why do you call me good? And so the question is, why would Jesus respond this way to this man? This man seemed to be heartfelt, to be earnest, to be very respectful, asking a deep spiritual question. And Jesus pushes back with a short, almost confrontational reply.

It's helpful when we're reading the gospels, and I think especially here for us, to always keep in mind not just what Jesus taught, but also keep in mind how he taught. Because Jesus always was incredibly intentional. He's always driving at something. In his interaction, he was never just walking mindlessly through those. He was aiming towards a specific end, and most often what Jesus was doing was, he was trying to get to matters of the heart. He wanted to get to the person's heart. He wanted to see what was really in them. What were their intentions?

Now it's because of that, that Jesus didn't get caught up in showy religious acts. If someone came and did something extremely outwardly pious, it didn't influence Jesus. He would always ask a question, he would always drive back to matters of the heart. And that's precisely what he was doing here with this man. This man called Jesus good teacher. And I already said it was very rare, but "very" doesn't even aptly describe what it was.

We have no other example of a teacher ever being referred to this way. And Jesus' response seems to suggest that this man wasn't necessarily offering words of respect. It seems almost as if he was trying to flatter Jesus. Butter him up a little bit. "Oh, good teacher. You're so good." And you can't butter up Jesus. Jesus doesn't fall for flattery.

Now, this does maybe tell us a thing or 2 about this man. This probably was a man who knew how to get things done. He knew how to work and manipulate his world in order to get what he wants. Went up to Jesus, "Oh, you're so good. Now let me ask you this question, now that I've adequately buttered you up."

But that doesn't work with Jesus. Jesus again is driving to the heart of the matter. And we have to keep that in mind because if we're not careful, we'll start to wonder why didn't Jesus explain that he was God also and that he was good? Or why did Jesus suggest that keeping the commandments were the things this man needed to do to inherit eternal life and those are good questions?

But we have to keep in mind what's happening here. Jesus is having a very intentional interaction with this particular man, and he wanted to get to the level



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of the heart with this man so that he could address his greatest need. That's what Jesus was doing.

So now the question is, when Jesus gives this response, how would the man respond? Verse 20.

20 And he said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up."

In other words, that's great, I'm good. Check. You know, this guy seems to be someone who is fairly impressed with himself. Probably was a very good man. Probably a very impressive man. In fact, the crowds around Jesus may also have been very impressed by this man. This would be the kind of person that you'd say, that's the kind of, that's the kind of man you want in your group. He'd be a great recruit to join Jesus' team. Said, "I got it, I did all that. All of it. Ever since I was accountable for it, for my youth up, I got all that covered." This is a pretty self-confident individual. But now, as we continue, things are about to take a very dramatic turn. Verse 21.

21 Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "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. 22 But at these words, he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property."

Now there's some tough bits that we need to address in here. But before we dig in to the details, just have to take note of Jesus' response, this striking detail that only Mark in his gospel includes in this story. And it's that Jesus felt a love for him. I don't think there's any question, we can feel it as we read this story. This may have been a tense exchange. There's a little bit of confrontation that Jesus is doing. He has some hard words for this man. But I think it's so important that Mark includes Jesus' motivation. Jesus was motivated by love. It's because he loved this man that Jesus confronted this man.

Should we expect anything less? This is who Jesus is, who he was, who he still is. This is exactly the way he describes himself. In Matthew 11, you might remember that he said he is gentle and lowly in heart. We can't let that lead us to believe that he won't confront us, but we always have to remember when he confronts us, he confronts us in love.

It's just what he did with this man. This man came at Jesus in his last interaction, the last thing he said, very self-confident, probably veering into pride. And Jesus met that pride with a loving, challenging response. It's important that we remember love does not preclude—it doesn't mean that we can't challenge in love.



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God's kind of love is best defined this way. Love seeks and does that which is good for the person. For the person that God loves, seeks to do what is good. Now, there are times where what is good for me will be quite challenging to me. But because God loves me, he will do that which is challenging for me—because, precisely because—he loves me and he wants what is good for me.

Now, Jesus in this interaction, he challenged this man precisely at the point where Jesus knew there was resistance. He knew what was going on at the level of the heart. Jesus knew all along what we only just learned in the sad moment that this man turned away: this man was very wealthy. He owned much property, we're told. And his wealth, his wealth created an obstacle to his full commitment to Jesus. Because Jesus loved him, he had to go right at it. Jesus highlighted the very thing that was the problem in his heart.

Jesus said, "you lack one thing," which is such an interesting statement. Someone who is wealthy, of course, doesn't lack for hardly anything, do they? Someone who has many possessions, who has much property, they don't lack for anything, because they can buy nearly everything except the most important thing. Jesus said to him, there's something you lack. You lack one thing.

But isn't it interesting that he didn't then say, "here's the one thing you lack"? We have to infer it by what Jesus said to him next. Jesus said, I want you to go, I want you to sell all that you own, I want you to give to the poor, and I want you to come and follow me. And the man knew he could not. Could not do it. Could not let go of his possessions. Could not let go of all that he had gathered up for himself, his treasure. And that means that what he lacked was the willingness and the ability to set everything aside to follow Jesus.

This man was possessed by his possessions. He consumed, but the things that he consumed had begun to consume him. Money, which was supposed to be his servant had become his master. Therefore, therefore, he could not let go of it. He could not set it all aside to take up the call to be with Jesus. Couldn't give up everything to be with him.

The simple truth is, Jesus says it over and over again in different ways for this man to come in from the crowd, really for any of us to come in from the crowd: we have to be willing to come empty-handed to set it all down. To say nothing compares, nothing compares to you. This man couldn't do it. He couldn't do it.

And he didn't miss Jesus' point, did he? He turned, full of grief. He understood his heart's unwillingness. He understood that he couldn't let go of that which he had built up. He couldn't let go of all that he had gained in order to gain Christ. He couldn't do it. So he left sad, he left grieved. But he also left and returned to what



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Jesus had revealed was his true love. He returned to his wealth. It's an absolutely tragic story. Absolutely tragic.

So now, understanding, understanding how shocking this all must have been, to the crowd, to Jesus' disciples, Jesus then proceeds and he continued to teach in verse 23.

23 And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples [here's this phrase we quoted earlier], "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! 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." 26 They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

Now let me tell you what I would have been tempted to do in that moment if I were Jesus. As I saw the shocked faces, I would have been tempted to soften the message. I would have been tempted to pull back a little bit, to say, "You know what, now, listen, some of you still own houses." Peter and Andrew owned a house. Their mother-in-law was sick in their house. They had a house in Capernaum, right by the sea.

So if I were Jesus, I would have wanted to say, "Now, I'm not literally saying every single person has to sell all that they have. I'm not, that's not, don't take me to say that. That's not what I'm doing." But that's not what Jesus said, is it?

See, I'd be tempted to soften it because I don't believe that Jesus means every single person that follows him is supposed to sell all their possessions. I don't believe that. And so if I were him in that moment, I would have wanted to make it abundantly clear that that is not what I was directing every single person to do.

But that's not what he did at all. In fact, what he did was he doubled down on the message. He got even more emphatic with it. He included an amusing image, an illustration that I think was essentially used to make them laugh. He says, it's like a, it's like a, it's like a camel going through the little eye of a needle. In other words, impossible. And that's why they say "then who can be saved?"

And I think Jesus doubled down here because he understood intimately the dramatic challenge that wealth poses for the human heart, and so he wanted to be dead serious about it. He wanted to offer a serious warning and be abundantly clear about a few things that the disciples had gotten wrong, some misperceptions that were very common in that day.



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The first misperception comes from the end of that series of verses we just read. Jesus wanted to make it clear, abundantly clear, that being wealthy did not mean you were more favored by God. See, that was a common assumption during that time. It was commonly believed that material possessions were an indication that God's abundant blessing had come upon a person. And Jesus wanted to make it abundantly clear that is not true. It's that very belief that led the disciples to say in astonishment, well, if this rich guy can't be saved, who can be saved?

That's because there's a belief that says riches mean God's favor and grace has been poured out upon someone. Jesus made it clear, no one can save themselves and riches are not a sign, an indication of favor, from God. It is impossible for any person to save themselves, but nothing is impossible with God. And anyone who is saved will be saved purely because God can do the impossible. He can save the unworthy, and rich and poor alike. They are saved by one means: by the grace of God being poured out. Salvation is by grace alone. Riches guarantee nothing. They guarantee nothing and Jesus wanted to make that very clear.

But, the most difficult to understand verses are, in verses 23, and 25. And so the question is, what do we do with that teaching, that very strong word of warning? Essentially, Jesus says in those verses that wealth can be very dangerous, wealth consumes us. Wealth is a demanding type of thing. That's why he says it's hard for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. So the question for us is, what do we do?

We can't dismiss those statements. We're Bereans. We believe our Bible. Jesus said it. We have to deal with it. And as we encounter this verse, I do think that's just our very first step is we have to have the courage to say, "we need to wrestle with this." Jesus offered a very strong word of warning about wealth, and while it can be uncomfortable, let's not soften it, because he did not. Let's not soften it, but we also need to understand why. Why was he so strong on this point? Why was he so strong? What exactly is the risk that wealth provides? Why is it such a problem? Did he hear what he says? We need to wrestle with it.

And that's simply, for you and me, that's a commitment. We need to commit to taking Jesus at his word, and wrestling with what he says. And we need to ask that the Lord, by his Spirit, would give us courage to really weigh his words. It's just a commitment that we need to make every day, every time we open our Bible. We need to make that commitment. Lord, I'm going to take you at your word. I am going to dig in and figure out, "what does this mean?"

But then we need to get into the why. In order to do that for this passage, I think we just need to zoom out a little bit and look at the overall biblical teaching about possessions and wealth, and about money. And a pretty generic summary is that



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the Bible addresses money and wealth and possessions this way. Wealth and possessions are goods, not ultimate goods, but they are goods, they are resources that we are to enjoy. And simultaneously, they are great temptations. They are great temptations, not bad in and of themselves, but they come with great temptation.

New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg said this, he said, "Wealth and money, possessions, are one of the primary means of turning human hearts away from God." One of the primary means in scripture, why scripture offers warning after warning after warning. If we wonder why Jesus was so serious, why he didn't soften his message, this is why: it's because this is very serious. He demands that we take it very seriously.

So now the question is, the question is, is that all we're to do with this? And I think this teaching, this strong warning from Jesus, requires more than mental assent, more than just understanding and agreeing. I think it's good for us to consider, is there an active step that each of us is called to take because of what Jesus says here? He offers this strong warning, so what exactly are we to do?

Now there are people, and there are churches, that would say we need to approach Jesus and just take him at his word, read him in a straightforward way. And so literally, what every Christian needs to do is sell all their possessions and give it to the poor and live together in a happy compound. That's what many people say. But I've already said, I don't believe that was Jesus' intent. I don't believe that was the step that he called all of his disciples to take.

In fact, we already named there were disciples that owned property. We're on the way to Jerusalem at this moment, and we know that Jesus is going to be buried in a tomb owned by a very rich man, Joseph of Arimathea. I don't think Jesus was saying, literally, this is what all Christians everywhere need to do.

But, as I say that, I do have a question. As I say that, does it bring you a great sense of relief? Because if so, we should pay attention to that. Because that might mean that our heart is growing an attachment to "stuff." And that can be a little bit of a warning light on the dashboard that we say to the Lord, "Lord, I don't want to become overly attached. I don't want to overvalue that what you intend as a resource that I will steward."

The chances are all of us, to a certain extent, when we've heard this teaching and we've talked about it, and we say we don't think Jesus is literally saying everyone has to literally do this, the chances are there's a part of every person's heart in this room that says, "thank goodness." And we need to address that. Individually, we just need to be aware of that and we need to understand that we live in the midst of a consumeristic world. We are constantly told, buy more, have more, possess



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more, and that is so common. It is so frequent that we might not even know the degree to which we become attached to that way of thinking. So when we consider this text, it's a great heart check for us.

Now, there's a general step that I want to encourage everyone to take. And after I give a general one, I'm going to give a specific one. But generally, I just want to encourage every person to talk to Jesus about this. Your time of prayer, don't dismiss it, don't soften it. You say, "Lord, what would you have me do with this? Is there any area of my life where I become overly attached to possessions, to wealth, to money?" Jesus will guide.

But I also want to talk about a specific step. And this is one way where I do believe God powerfully uses our giving. I believe that one thing that God does when we give is he uses it as a powerful and practical way of countering the temptation to overvalue wealth. When we give, we talk about it often. Every time we have that moment in our service, we talk about how we give because God generously gives to us. And so we just freely give back, and that's absolutely right.

Rich was talking earlier about how there are loads of things that we do. We want to live lives of worship. And so when we give, it can be an act of worship as well. But one thing we don't talk about as often is that giving can also be an incredibly powerful counter-cultural act that puts money and things back in its proper place. When we let go of it, we say it is not ultimately the greatest good there is. When we let go of it, we're dismissing from our lives, we're releasing that which seeks to consume us and possess us, we're letting go of that which is a temptation. And God uses that to help us live in freedom and keep money in its proper perspective: a good thing that God gives us for enjoyment. But ultimately, it can't become a replacement for God, something that we trust. When we give, God does that. He shapes our heart in that way.

Now, this message is not part of any giving campaign. And so I just even want to say—let's remove it from the realm of Lincoln Berean. When you give to a nonprofit in town, I believe God uses that. So it's a powerful way that he helps us take a step away from our culture, which values money above everything else. And God uses it to recalibrate our hearts to him, to understand what is truly valuable.

What is most important? Going back to our story. The rich young ruler, as he's called in the other gospels, has left. He's gone away saddened, grieved, determined that the cost of following Jesus, for him, it was too great for him. It was too costly. And that reveals the saddest piece of the entire story. Because what it tells us is he only factored in that which he was giving up, he didn't factor in that which he was going to gain.



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This man was so consumed, so possessed, by his possessions, so taken with his treasure, that he failed to recognize the treasure that stood right in front of him and was speaking to him. Failed to recognize that in giving up, he would gain the opportunity to be with the greatest treasure there is to be with: Jesus Christ.

Jesus, as he continues, highlights that when we go to him, when we go to him, as we release that which tempts us, we release that which seeks to hold us and keep us from him. We don't suffer loss, we gain the greatest gain there is because he is the greatest treasure. And so the story continues in verse 28. Peter began—it's always Peter.

28 Peter began to say to him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you." 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 sake, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last, first."

I don't know whether Peter was patting himself on the back in that moment—a very Peter thing to do—or whether he was just stating the facts. But the most illuminating point is what Jesus said. See, while the man left, full of grief, full of sadness, while the man calculated how much following Jesus was going to cost him, he failed to calculate what he would gain. Failed to calculate what he would gain.

See, as we draw near to Jesus, if we respond to his call when he says, "come to me," he doesn't shrink back from challenging us. He doesn't shrink back from reminding us that when we come, we have to in our heart do what the old hymn says. We do have to come saying, "I surrender all," not some. I surrender all, Lord. I let it go.

He doesn't shrink back from, in love, ruthlessly reminding us, "Let it all go. It can't satisfy." In love, he challenges us to come forward, to come to him with empty hands. But then he promises that while we come to him with empty hands, we don't remain with him with empty hands. We experience, we encounter, the greatest treasure there is. We find life with Christ. And when we come to him and his kingdom, we gain him and everything else gets thrown in.

He said, seek first my kingdom and it's righteousness, and all these things, all these things, will be added to you. To come to Christ is no loss, it is only gain. And it is the greatest gain there is. Because that's true, let us let go of that which hinders, let us boldly assess, "Lord, are there parts of my heart tied, holding on to, things



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that hinder?" And let us, by the Spirit, let go of them and run towards him. Because following him is our greatest gain.

Our Father, we thank you. We thank you that you sent your Son and that you call us, Jesus, to come to you, offering us fullness of life. That you promise when we let go of all in order to come to you, we find the riches and the treasure that our heart so deeply longs for. Lord, help us to know it, help us to believe it, help us to act on it, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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