

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church  
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **Demanding the Impossible**

Mark 10:17-31

“Well,” as Dana Carvey used to say on Saturday Night Live, “Wasn’t that special?” Here we are, you and I, living in one of the wealthiest areas of this country, a country that is one of the wealthiest in the world. And we hear Jesus tell a wealthy young man to sell everything he has and give it away. Then after the young man turns away sorrowfully, Jesus exclaims, “How hard it is for those who have wealth 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.”

There’s probably no more unsettling statement in all of Scripture for many of us than that: easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Are we to understand that everything we have worked to accumulate somehow blocks our getting into God’s kingdom? Is it true that simply having been successful disqualifies us for the kingdom of heaven? Or is there something else to Jesus’ words than simply a critique of wealthy people?

Begin by noting the young man’s apparent sense that something wasn’t right in his life. He is not satisfied, not complete, not fulfilled even though he is successful and wealthy. That may call into question our own satisfaction if it is grounded in our hard work, our success or our possessions. Here’s a young man who’s done everything right. He’s every parent’s dream. He lived a good life, a righteous life. He kept the Sabbath religiously. Honored his father and mother, didn’t commit murder or adultery, didn’t steal or bear false witness. Nor did he covet what wasn’t his. He’d worked hard, accomplished everything he set out to do and made a fortune in the process. Except he wasn’t happy or content. He was searching, grasping at what he could not find. “Good Teacher,” he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Note that Jesus didn’t criticize the young man for being rich. He didn’t question how the young man may have become rich, whether legitimately or otherwise. Jesus didn’t pass judgment at all. He simply answered the question. “You know the commandments,” he said... Sure, the young man answered. I’ve kept them from my youth. Well then, Jesus said, there is one more thing you can do, one more commandment you can keep. Get rid of all that is holding you back. Sell everything you own, become one with the poor by giving them everything you have. You’ll find heavenly treasure that way. Then come follow me.

Well, what do you think? Is Jesus also speaking to us? What must we do? We’re searching, aren’t we? Certainly many people in our society are searching. How many hours a day do people spend surfing the internet? And what are they searching for? How many dollars a day do people gamble at the gaming tables. And what are they searching for? How many bottles a day do people drink? And what are they searching for? How many pills do people pop a day? And what are they searching for? Lots of people are searching, grasping for what they cannot find. What shall we say to them, you and I? How shall we answer when people ask us, “What must we do to inherit eternal life?”

We’re a lot like that young man you know. Most of us obey the rules. We work hard. Play hard, too. We take our kids and grandkids to amusement parks. We go to movies, or to a concert at the Phil. We read books, buy and sell houses, drive fancy cars. And if we can’t do that, if we’re not successful enough or wealthy enough to do all that, we may envy those who are. We aspire to be like them, to drive a BMW or a Mercedes, to have a vacation home or two. We read the Wall Street Journal and keep track of our investments. We do all those

things, and what is the result? Do we gain a sense of security? Have we attained peace of mind? Do we have a lock on eternal life? Are we like that young man still grasping . . . grasping for something we cannot find?

How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus said. How hard it is! But he wasn't talking only to the rich. He may as well have added that it was easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the poor to enter the kingdom of God. He didn't, but he may as well have. Because the young man's problem was much deeper than being rich. Being rich just made it easier for him to be cut off from the community, to somehow ignore his relationship with his neighbors, while all the time thinking he was on good terms with God.

Have you noticed the bonuses being reported on Wall Street? Not that there is nothing wrong with getting a bonus. But when huge bonuses are given to a few while the rest of the country is struggling, there's an obvious disconnect between the individual and the community. To offer or to accept million dollar bonuses while over ten percent of the people are unemployed is to put it bluntly obscene, especially when you consider that those unemployed have paid taxes that in some way have bailed out the financiers. I repeat, it's not the money, it's the lack of conscience, the total self-absorption and lack of any sense of community.

The issue again is NOT, I repeat, NOT wealth. Remember? The issue is how do we get into the kingdom of God. For anyone, rich or poor, strong or weak, meek or mild . . . It is hard, impossibly hard to get into the kingdom of God. Wealth only makes it more difficult, because it is so easy for us who are well to do to feel secure in our personal situation. So when the disciples asked who can be saved, "Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'" For God, all things are possible, he said. Then he headed for Jerusalem and a cross.

In the cartoon, *For Better or For Worse* one day, Elizabeth opened her piggy bank. "Look!" she said, "I've got nine dollars and eleven cents to spend on Christmas. Her older brother Mike was not impressed. Older brothers rarely are impressed with little sisters, you know. Mike said, "You can't buy something for everyone with nine dollars and eleven cents, Lizzie." "I'm gonna try," she replied. "Well," said Mike, "they're sure gonna be cheap presents." To that Lizzie responded with absolute conviction, "Nothing is cheap, Michael, if it costs all the money you have."

Nothing is cheap if it costs all the money you have. Nothing is cheap when it costs you everything — even your life. That's the issue in this story. What's it worth to you, this kingdom of God? Is it worth everything you have, even your life? Isn't that what Christ did? For you? For me? For the world? When something costs you everything you have, the more you have the harder it is to pay the price. Agreed? Maybe that's why Jesus told the young man to sell all his goods, to give it to the poor, and to follow him. What we're grasping for, you and I, this thing called eternal life, costs more than we're willing to pay. Much more. And yet, there's no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for Christ's sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age — houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions — and in the age to come eternal life.

We've been talking about a vision for our future. We've been talking about it for several weeks now. You know it's going to cost something to bring this vision about, and I'm not talking about money. What our vision requires of us is not wealth, but the abandonment of a lifestyle of grasping and holding. What the future asks of us is not success and accomplishment. We're invited to trust God, and invest ourselves, to give ourselves away, to lose ourselves in the effort. We build this vision to glorify God, not ourselves. We build to glorify God, to strengthen this people of God, their mission, their life together. We set out in confidence, not because we have the resources to do what God asks us to do, but because we don't. Christ demands of us more than we can give. And yet we believe all things are possible with God. And God will provide what we need.