

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

6

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT MATERIAL BLESSINGS

Mark 10:17–31

By Marlene Nathan

“The compassion of Jesus was shown in tangible, not merely “spiritual” ways. We who follow His example also ought to engage in tangible works of mercy and love.”

David O. Moberg

“I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when He warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one’s eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people’s hand, eyes, lips and hearts.”

Dom Helder Camara

“Wealth can blind our moral judgment, harden the arteries of compassion, and lead to spiritual bankruptcy. The man was unable to give what he had for the benefit of others because he cared only about himself and nobody else (‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’). He was imprisoned in a dungeon of concern only for his welfare. The attitude contrasts starkly the Son of Man’s self-giving love: Jesus had compassion on the crowds and fed them and will eventually give his life for the many (10:45). How can someone like the rich man live in luxury and be complacent about the needs of others, while professing discipleship to one who gave his life for others?”

David E. Garland

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AIM OF STUDY

- To take a close look at what Jesus taught on the subject of material blessings and the Kingdom of God in order to understand how it applies to us today.

KEY VERSE

“Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”

Matthew 19:21

PREPARATION

The authors suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Then, before you read over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, read through the Bible study below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means, you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving all of these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice should be the focus of your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- Also, you may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any

background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders' benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

PREPARATION RECOMMENDATION

All leaders need to bring to their small group meeting resources listing opportunities to **participate** in or partner with the **urban ministries** of our church. If you already support or engage in ministry with them on a regular basis, several days before this meeting, ask someone in the group to share a highlight from being involved in that work. If you do not have a regular place to serve, come with a few ideas for the group to decide on. You may find this information on a printed sheet in the church lobby, which has suggestions for both groups and individuals. Some of these are usually listed in a current issue of *The Mix*, our monthly magazine, or on our website. For more specific details, contact the Administrative Assistant of the Fruit of the Vine (Urban) Ministries.

OPENERS

Jesus always practiced what He preached. He never asked His disciples to do anything that He hadn't already done. Consider the topic of money and possessions, a subject some believe Jesus taught on more than any other single subject in the gospels. When He first called the twelve disciples, the clear implication was, "Leave your livelihood and the only means of supporting yourself and your family, and follow me!" His advice to the rich young ruler was to sell all that he owned, give the money to the poor, and then follow Him.

In His calls and His teachings, Jesus asked His disciples to follow His example. Jesus had left all the power, wealth, and glory of heaven in order to come to earth as our Savior. (Many of us won't even consider leaving the comforts of home for a few weeks of mission work in a third world nation!) Even by worldly standards, Jesus was not very well off. He was born in a barn to a poor teenage girl and her working class husband. Jesus became a skilled laborer, a carpenter, like Joseph and knew the meaning of hard work. He never really owned anything. He admitted He didn't even have a place to "lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). He had to borrow a donkey to ride, borrow a boat to teach in, borrow a room for Passover, and even borrow a

tomb to be buried in. So when Jesus said some “hard” things about wealth and material blessings, we must recognize He matched His message with His life. Today, we often “spiritualize” what Jesus said about wealth in order to take the sharp edge off His words. We hope He didn’t mean for us to take Him literally. Would He really expect us to sell all of our possessions in order to be Christians? Let’s examine a passage in the Gospels where Jesus teaches specifically about wealth and handling money responsibly to determine what He really meant.

Pray that your group would have open ears and soft hearts to what God wants to teach you through His Word. Ask His Spirit to personalize this study for each person participating.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide how much to share with your small group.

The church has always taught that Mark, an associate of the apostle Peter, wrote the Gospel of Mark. Mark took Peter’s preaching and recorded it carefully. It also seems that Mark wrote to encourage first century believers experiencing severe persecution after the great fire in Rome in 64 A.D. which the emperor Nero blamed on Christians (Garland, pp. 26–28). To reinforce their faith and strengthen their resolve to persevere, Mark drew parallels between what Jesus suffered and what His followers were facing (Garland, p. 29). Jesus not only set an example for them of how to face trials but also how to face death (Garland, p. 30). Ultimately, “Mark does not complain about the inhumane suffering that Christians undergo but shows that persecution should lead to confession—the confession by Christians that leads to the confession of others (15:39)” (Garland, p. 31). Thus key themes in this gospel include the cross, discipleship, and the suffering of the Son of God, the Messiah, who was predicted to receive authority to rule the world in Daniel 7:13–14.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Mark 10:17–31

In Mark 10, Jesus was once again teaching the crowds. This was a change in direction, as He had been focusing His ministry exclusively towards His disciples (8:27–9:50). He was also changing the geographical direction of His ministry, moving from the northern area of Galilee towards central Judea. His plan was to arrive in Jerusalem, where the final scenes of salvation history would occur. He had just finished fielding questions on divorce (vv.1–12) and blessing the children (vv.13–16) when a man approached.

- 1. Let’s read this passage together. Will someone read aloud verses 17–22 and someone else read verses 23–31?**

Who came up to Jesus, what was the person like, and what did he want to know (v. 17)?

The composite picture of this man is that he was young (Matthew 19:20), a ruler (Luke 18:18), and rich (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Despite his social position, he recognized Jesus' status and came to Him on his knees. If this man was in the crowd listening to Jesus teach, he had obviously missed Jesus' meaning. Jesus had just said that to enter the Kingdom, one must receive it "like a child" (v. 14–15). This man was young, rich and in charge. He must have had a strong "can-do" mentality; he seemed to believe that he could actually *do* something that would earn him eternal life! "Entering the kingdom" and "inheriting eternal life" express the same idea.

Tom Wright explains why this young man was so intent on finding out how to inherit eternal life. Many first century Jews were waiting for a decisive event that would begin a new age, "the **Age to Come**."

A great event would occur which would bring justice and peace, freedom for Israel, punishment for evildoers (whether Jews or Gentiles), a time of prosperity when all the prophecies would be fulfilled, all the righteous dead would be raised to new life, all the world would burst out into a new and endless spring.

The **Present Age**, their own time, was full of sin and injustice, lying and oppression. Good people suffered; wicked people got away with it. But in the Age to Come that would all be different. And the question pressing in on any Jew who believed this was: can I be sure that I will be one of those who will inherit the Age to Come, and if so, how? The phrase '**kingdom** of God'... is another way of talking about the same thing: the Age to Come is the period in which God is as last ruling the world as he has always wanted to
(Wright, pp. 134–135).

2. Jesus' initial response seemed to avoid the man's question and to be somewhat abrupt (v.18). Why do you think He said this?

Jesus seemed to challenge the man to stop and think about his quest for salvation. Jesus did not deny His goodness or His deity, but pointed out the implications of the truth of what the man said. If Jesus *is* good and therefore *is* God, then He and His teachings should be obeyed.

3. Why do you think Jesus went on to summarize some of the Ten Commandments (v. 19)?

The particular commandments Jesus cited were from the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, those that deal with our relationships with others. He mentioned numbers six through nine and then number five. The phrase “do not defraud” is not part of the Ten. “To defraud” is to “cheat” (m-w.com). However, the word in the Greek, *apostereo*, literally means, “to rob or deprive.” Perhaps Jesus referred this way to the last commandment, do not covet. He who covets what belongs to others has in his heart already deprived them of it. Therefore, coveting anything other than God’s gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:39) may be a cause of defrauding the poor of God’s provision!

Jesus seemed to skip the first four commandments, which are concerned with honoring God first, not worshipping idols, honoring God’s name, and honoring the Sabbath. Tom Wright suggests that Jesus did go back to the first three and the tenth, do not covet, in an indirect way. When He told the man to sell all his wealth and give it to the poor, Jesus called him to abandon greed, which is idolatry, and covetousness. Likewise, to call God “good” and to obey Him only, reflects honoring Him above anyone else, honoring His name, and following God’s law in a radically deeper way than ever before (p. 136). Or, Jesus may have omitted the first four because it wasn’t necessary to mention them. If we fail to do the last six—love our fellow humans, we certainly have failed to do the first four—love the Creator who made all people (1 John 4:20).

Jesus used the law to bring about “the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). For Him, keeping the law is more than external behavior; it’s internal heart attitudes as well (Matthew 5:21–48).

4. What did the young man’s response reveal about him (v. 20)?

The man answered Jesus quite confidently that yes, indeed, he had obeyed, and has done so ever since he was a boy. He may have been referring to his Bar Mitzvah, the point where Jewish boys reach the age of religious responsibility. His obedience, however, was most likely external and therefore could not give him internal peace and assurance that he would in fact inherit eternal life. He wanted to believe that all was well with his soul, but in truth, he was insecure about his “salvation.” Despite all his efforts to keep the Law of Moses, he was still a sinner with a sin nature. The apostle Paul went through the same struggle (Romans 7:14–23).

5. What was Jesus’ attitude toward the young man (v. 21)?

The Greek language has several different words that are all translated “love.” The word used here is *agape*, which in the New Testament is the word used to describe God’s love, love that is unconditional and self-sacrificing. So Jesus was not just feeling affection or friendship for this young man, which would have been denoted by the word *phileo*. Instead, He was expressing the highest form of love, divine love.

Jesus’ *agape* love for this young man could have been stirred by admiration for such an earnest and sincere desire for eternal life as well as deep pity for the true state of the man’s soul.

6. According to Jesus, what was the one thing the young man still lacked (v. 21)? What did Jesus tell him to do? What root issue was Jesus getting at?

In the parallel account in Matthew 19, the young man asked, “What do I still lack?” He was convinced that all he needed to inherit eternal life was to add something to his “to-do” list.

Jesus, however, was not talking about an “addition” but a “substitution.” This young man needed to substitute one treasure for another—his wealth for eternal life. Jesus was calling the young man to what He calls everyone to: faith. **It would take great faith in God’s goodness for this rich young ruler to sell all that he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Christ.** He had depended upon his riches all his life. Selling his possessions would leave him needy and require that that he trust or have faith in Jesus for everything. It’s interesting to note that some rabbinic laws prohibited the selling of all one’s possessions because it would reduce a man to poverty. But, according to Jesus, this is precisely the condition we must be in before we can be saved! We must renounce everything—our lives, our families, our material goods—in order to surrender to the gospel call of Christ. Such abandonment leaves us totally dependent on God. This is difficult for people across the entire socio-economic spectrum. See below for Jesus’ comments about how hard it is particularly for the rich (vv. 23–25).

Jesus did not tell this man to just get rid of his wealth; he was to give the proceeds to the poor. Every good Jew was responsible to help provide for the poor according to the Law of Moses. Remembering the poor was required of anyone who claimed to be a follower of God. [See the study on Deuteronomy 14 and 15 in this series entitled, “God’s Design to Bless the Poor.”]

***Was Jesus setting a precedent? Was He telling all Christians to sell all their possessions?**

An obvious question that arises from this passage is whether or not this is a command for all followers of Christ for all time. Does every Christian need to sell his or

her possessions in order to inherit eternal life? Most scholars feel the answer is “no.” In the Gospels, Jesus did not tell everyone that they had to sell their possessions, He told just this young man. There are records throughout the Bible of wealthy people who followed the Lord and kept their wealth, including Abraham (Genesis 13:2) and Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57). Even Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector, gave away only half of his belongings to the poor, paid back his “victims” four times what he had cheated them, and presumably kept the rest for himself. Yet Jesus declared that salvation had come to him that day (Luke 19:1–10). Scriptures like Luke 14:33, “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple,” must be interpreted the same way we interpret verses that tell us to hate our fathers and mothers (Luke 14:26). Jesus is not being literal; He is exhorting us to put loyalty to Him above and before everything else in our lives. We must also keep in mind that giving away all that we have does not earn us anything with God. The consistent message of Scripture is there is *nothing* we can *do* to merit or earn eternal life (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8–9)!

7. How did the young man respond to Jesus’ demand (v. 22)? Why do you think he was so sad?

As He had done many times before, Jesus zeroed in on the core issue with this young man. It was his wealth that interfered with his ability to inherit eternal life because it held him back from total surrender to Christ. While there is nothing we can do to earn eternal life, it does cost us our lives. The gate is narrow that leads to eternal life (Matthew 7:13–14). To go through that gate, we must deny ourselves, pick up a cross, and follow Him, being willing to give up our very lives (Mark 8:34–36). This young man wanted Jesus, but he wanted his wealth, too. He was not willing to surrender it all, because for him, Jesus was not yet “the pearl of great price,” what he treasured most in life (Matthew 13:45–46).

***If Jesus were to look at you with love, what might He say is the one thing you lack right now in your life?**

8. When the young man left, Jesus used the opportunity to teach His disciples (vv. 23–31). What did He want them to understand? Why is it especially hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? What, though, is Jesus’ main point? Did the disciples “get it”?

Jesus wanted them to understand that inheriting eternal life (or entering the Kingdom) is hard. It is especially hard for the rich, but not just for them. It’s hard for everyone. The accounts of this story in Matthew and Luke have Jesus commenting only about the rich. Some manuscripts of Mark have the phrase, “for those who trust in riches,” right after “how hard it is...” (v. 24). Some scholars feel this addition was

not in the original autograph and that a later scribe inserted the phrase to agree with the other Gospels or to make Jesus' words easier to accept. While some feel Jesus is talking exclusively about the rich, others feel He is making a more general statement. Basically, it is hard for everyone to enter the Kingdom (Matthew 7:13–14; Mark 8:34–36).

For the rich, it is extremely hard to enter the Kingdom, not just because of what they must give up but also because of the nature of wealth itself, which tends to give people a false sense of being in control. All disciples must give up everything to follow Christ. So in one sense, the rich just have more material possessions to give up. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also warned that money is like a master (Matthew 6:24). This truth is evident everywhere: people will do anything for money. They will change jobs, move to new cities, work long hours, destroy their marriages, and sacrifice their families for money. Money has this kind of power because it is similar to God. It promises the same things that God promises—such as happiness, protection, good health, long life, etc. In every way, money is a false or counterfeit god, promising “the good life” but really unable to deliver it. Those who have had the most money in the past century were some of the most miserable people on earth. [Examples would include Howard Hughes, J. Paul Getty, and countless media stars.] So, according to Jesus, it is impossible to serve both money and God, since both demand complete devotion. Paul also notes the unique power of money when he tells Timothy, “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

To illustrate exactly how difficult it is to get into the kingdom, Jesus compared it to a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Many scholars have attempted to explain this illustration by suggesting the camel is really a “cable” or that the eye of a needle was a well-known gateway in the city of Jerusalem which was quite low and narrow, forcing camels to kneel down in order to pass through. But there is little evidence for either explanation.

The disciples were at first confused by what Jesus said. They understood wealth as a sign of God's blessing, and poverty as a sign of His discipline and disapproval. After all, God had included material abundance as part of His covenant blessings when He outlined the stipulations to Moses and the Israelites (Deuteronomy 28:1–14). They believed that if anyone was acceptable to God, it was the rich. But what Jesus said was radically contrary to what they believed. Then they obviously “got it” because they came up with the most logical question: “Who then can be saved?” If the rich, who appear to experience God's favor, have a hard time entering the kingdom, then what about the rest of us?

9. How did Jesus answer their concern, and how did He reassure them (v. 27)?

Salvation is a work of God from start to finish. It is a gift that is accepted by faith. While it is distressing that it is so hard to enter the kingdom, it is also reassuring because it does not depend upon us to get in but upon God. And with God, all things are possible! Of course, while God has done everything necessary to help us enter the kingdom, the one thing He cannot do is make us totally surrender. We must do that ourselves.

10. What did Peter bring up in verse 28, and why do you think he asked Jesus about this?

There is a note of self-pity in Peter's question here. Perhaps he felt God was being unjust. Speaking for the others, as he often did, he pointed out that they had in fact left everything to follow Him. They had actually done what was demanded of the rich young ruler. Where, then, was the promised treasure? When would they see the great rewards? It is apparent that Peter and the disciples were still listening to Jesus with "material" (worldly) ears and not "spiritual" (heavenly) ears.

11. How did Jesus respond to Peter's sense of "unfairness" (vv. 29–31)? What fundamental kingdom truths did Jesus lay out for the disciples?

Jesus began with the solemn phrase, "I tell you the truth," which means, "What I am about to say is extremely important!" He then seemed to make two basic points in verses 29–31.

One point is that there are two ages, this Present Age and the Age to Come. Some of the benefits of following Jesus are reserved for the Age to Come. In that age, things will be turned upside down from how they often are now. Those who have been on top, with the most success, the most power, and the most wealth, will end up on the bottom. And those who were on the bottom in this Present Age will one day be on the top. In other words, there will be perfect fairness and justice in God's Kingdom. However, we don't experience this fully in the here and now.

And two, no matter how much you have sacrificed for Jesus, you will be "reimbursed" many times more. In verse 29, Jesus said that anyone who has left home or mother or father etc., will receive homes *and* brothers *and* sisters, etc. (v. 30). No one can out-give the Lord (Romans 11:35–36). We can expect to receive much more than we gave up. This applies to this Present Age as well as the Age to Come.

The only difference is that in this Present Age we can also expect persecutions. Jesus not only spoke about suffering as the way to fulfilling His calling as the Savior for all people, but He also taught that His followers would experience great trials as well

(Mark 13:1–23; John 15:18–21, 16:1–4, 33). Finally Jesus reminds the disciples that they must learn to take the last place, to humble themselves, to not assume greatness in the Kingdom of God comes from positions of wealth, influence, and fame (v. 31; Mark 10:35–45).

APPLICATION

***How do these fundamental kingdom truths help make you more willing to surrender all that you have to Jesus?**

***In what ways have you already “received a hundred times as much” as you have given up for the Lord?**

***In light of this passage, what do you think the Lord might want you to do differently with your wealth and possessions? What, if anything, is holding you back from obeying?**

***What might our church or small group be able to accomplish if we loosened our grip on some of our possessions?**

Refer to the Preparation Recommendation in the beginning of this study.

WRAPPING IT UP

In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that wealth can be deceitful (Mark 4:19). It can trick us and fool us. We can be deceived into thinking our wealth will bring us security and happiness. Our wealth can blind us to our true spiritual condition (Luke 12:16–21). If we’re not careful, wealth can choke the spiritual life right out of us. As Christians, we need to be on our guard about the power of money and the deceitfulness of riches.

At the same time, we must cultivate a habit of giving. Jesus always commended those who gave of what they had, whether a lot or just a little (Luke 19:1–10; 21:1–4; Matthew 26:6–13). He praised them because giving is what characterizes the Father. He is kind, even to the ungrateful and the wicked (Luke 6:35). As His children, we are to reflect this quality of giving to the world.

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