



No place for **GREED** *on the way*

KATHLEEN RUSHTON,
interpreting Mark 10:17-31,
highlights how greed works
against discipleship of Jesus.

This story of Jesus and the rich man is integral to Mark 10. This chapter returns us to “in the beginning of creation” (Mk 10:6) and ushers Jesus’s radical teachings of powerlessness, childlikeness and poverty. As a new creation through Jesus’s death and resurrection, we are called “to receive the *basileia*/reign of God as a little child”.

Jesus teaches the disciples about the simplicity essential for following him “on the way” in five areas of ordinary life. He talks about the unity between man and woman that was at the beginning (Mk 10:2-9). He embraces children and declares that the *basileia* of God belongs to them (Mk 10:13-16). He teaches that they

must divest themselves of possessions and learn to trust totally in God’s providence (Mk 10:17-31). Peter and then James and John fail to grasp these teachings (Mk 10:35-45). Finally, Mark tells of the healing of the blind poor man who, in his powerlessness and poverty, is able to become a disciple of Jesus (Mk 10:46-52).

The dialogue of Jesus and the rich man begins and ends with being on “the way” (Mk 10:17, 32). Its three parts begin with the “gaze” of Jesus. In his conversation with the man (Mk 10:17-22) Jesus looks attentively at him (Mk 10:21). When he is teaching about the *basileia* of God (Mk 10:23-26) “Jesus looked around at his disciples ...” (Mk 10:23). When teaching on community and property (Mk 10:27-31) “Jesus looked at them ...” (Mk 10:27). And, surely there is a fourth part – where Jesus looks at you and me.

Jesus Looks Attentively at Him (Mk 10:17-22)

The man asks: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by listing some commandments. He inserts a commandment not in the Ten Commandments or in the Gospels of Luke or Matthew: “Do not defraud” – which refers clearly to economic exploitation. The phrase “do not defraud” is used in the OT for the act of “keeping back the wages” of a hireling (Deut 24:14). More is going on

14 October

Mark 10:17-30 – RL 28th Sunday Ordinary Time

Mark 10:17-31 – RCL 21st Sunday After Pentecost

in this story than the personal failings of one man. Jesus is discussing the wealthy elite class and inviting the man to be healed of his sickness — an affliction the scripture scholar Chad Myers names the “sickness of accumulation”.

When the man declares he has kept all the commandments since his youth, Jesus, “looking at him, loved him.” This is the only time Jesus is described as looking on an individual with love. But when Jesus invites him to be a disciple by selling all and giving the money to the poor, the man goes away “appalled”. This response evokes the prophet Ezekiel’s judgement on the rich and powerful of Tyre (Ez 27:35). The word used of the man going away — “sad” — also describes the distress the disciples feel later when Jesus says one of them will betray him (Mk 14:19).

The man in this story, according to the text, is neither young nor a ruler. He comes to Jesus and, kneeling, makes a request. Only after he refuses the invitation to be a disciple are we told “he had many possessions” — “properties” and “estates”. In the time of the Gospel, landowners were the most politically powerful social class. Bruce Malina suggests that when “rich” appears in the Bible it would be translated better as “greedy”. Mark sees that the man’s wealth was acquired by “defrauding” the poor. In his hidden life, Jesus had been a carpenter and experienced what it was like for workers in Galilee. He would have passed through estates to work as a day labourer building the wealthy city of Sepphoris nearby.

Jesus Looked around at His Disciples (Mk 10:23-26)

“When Jesus looked around at his disciples” and talked about the camel and the needle, he was probably using hyperbole in a kind of dry joke. There is a similar saying in the Babylonian Talmud about an elephant going through the eye of a needle. While the elephant was the biggest animal in the Babylonian area, the camel was the biggest animal in Palestine. In earlier verses, Jesus spoke of the need to “receive the *basileia* of God as a little child” (Mk 10:15). In Mk 10:23 he again turns expectations upside down by extending his solidarity with “the least” in the family to the economic system: “How hard it will be for those with wealth to enter the *basileia* of God!”

Most understood wealth as a blessing from God. However, Jesus rejects this view by making the renunciation of property a condition of entering into the *basileia* of God. The only way the greedy may enter is by redistributing their wealth. At that time people believed that everything of value already existed, was limited in supply and was distributed already. The “greedy”, who took more than they needed, took what belonged to others. This story comes, as do all the gospel stories, from a very different world from our society.

Jesus Looked at Them (MK 10:27-31)

“Jesus looked at them [the disciples]”, who were greatly astounded. How could they enter the *basileia* of God? He assures them that “for God all things are possible”. This way of living demands total dependence on God. The words that pass between Jesus and Peter show how little Peter

has understood (Mk 10:28-31). His focus is on how much he has done already: “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

Jesus was asking the greedy man attached to his independence, power and status to become dependent on the providence of God. Jesus calls for humility which identifies with those the world judges unimportant. Rather than individualistic upward mobility, the way of Jesus is downward mobility and solidarity with the poor.

Most understood wealth as a blessing from God. Jesus rejects this view. At that time people believed that everything of value already existed, was limited in supply and was distributed already. The “greedy”, who took more than they needed, took what belonged to others.

Not all his disciples were asked by Jesus to sell their possessions. Peter seems to have kept his house and boat (Mk 1:29; Jn 21:3); the women of Galilee have material resources (Mk 15:41) and Joseph of Arimathea has funds for preparing Jesus for burial (Mk 15:43-46). Not every disciple is called to the same degree of material poverty or to work among the poor. As Dean Brackley puts it: “Solidarity with the poor is an objective criterion for our lifestyle, but the particulars depend on our callings.”

Jesus Looks Attentively at Us

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the gap between the greedy and the rest has widened faster than in any other developed country. In our world the greediest 85 individuals own as much as the poorest 3 billion people together. This disparity is not just individual but systemic. The World Council of Churches calls it a problem of greed (*The Greed Line: Tool for a Just Economy*, 2016). We can help to make changes. For example, we can advocate for workers to receive the living wage. We can “fame” fair trade businesses and ask retailers where their goods are sourced. We can enquire whether an item is produced without exploited or slave labour from its source to our shop shelves.

Jesus looks attentively at us, but solidary with the least will require us to look attentively around us, too. ☀️

https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/publications/TheGreedLine_PeraltaandMshana_SAMPLE.pdf

Painting: *The Rich Man Went Away Sorrowful* by James Tissot. Brooklyn Museum



Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.