

Who can be saved? (Mark 10:17-31)

“Mom! Jesus says that rich people don’t go to heaven!” “We are not rich. Go back to bed.”

by [Stacey E. Simpson](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue

Here comes that man again, running up to Jesus with a question about eternal life. We can hear those dreaded words on Jesus’ lips even before the man approaches: “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.” Even before Mark tells us so, we know that the rich young man will turn away grieving, for he has many possessions. And some of us grieve with him as we see him leave, knowing his choice could be ours as well.

I remember the first time I read this story. I was seven years old, reading Mark’s Gospel in bed. When I got to verse 25, I was so alarmed that I slammed the Bible shut, jumped out of bed, and went running down the hall. I shook my mother out of a sound sleep. “Mom,” I whispered urgently, “Jesus says that rich people don’t go to heaven!”

“We are not rich. Go back to bed,” came my mother’s response.

I knew better. I knew I had all I needed plus plenty more. I would later learn of fascinating attempts to soften the text (the use of the word “camel” for “rope,” of “eye of the needle” for “a small gate”), but the little girl inside me knew that these words of Jesus were clear and hard and scary.

Mark 10:17-31 hangs on the question of eternal life. The rich man wants to know how to get it. The disciples want to know who can have it. And the good news that Jesus offers is this: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

This story is one of the healing stories. The rich man runs up to Jesus and kneels, just as countless other Jesus-pursuers have done throughout the Book of Mark. The scene is set for him to request and receive healing, and his running and kneeling show that his request is both urgent and sincere. But he is the one person in the

entire book who rejects the healing offered him.

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” Matthew and Luke leave this out. But Mark, always spare with words, takes the space to note that Jesus loves this man. He offers him healing. “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (In Mark, the word “go” is used almost exclusively in the healing stories.)

What is the healing that this man needs? What he lacks is that he does not lack. This man is possessed—but only by his possessions. Jesus is offering to free him of his possession, to cure him of his excess. But the rich man turns his back.

I grieve too. I have accumulated so much since first reading this text. Am I also possessed, but only of possessions? Am I refusing to be healed by Jesus? What can I do to inherit eternal life? Nothing. For mortals it’s impossible. But not for God. To say we must give up all our wealth in order to be saved puts the burden on us to save ourselves. Neither wealth nor divestment of wealth saves us. God does.

Even Jesus realized he could not save himself. Those who think they can will surely lose their lives. But those who recognize the utter futility of self-reliance, who realize that their salvation really is not possible, will be saved by the God who makes all things possible.

Yes, there is still the problem of having too much stuff. It keeps us from realizing our need for God because we use it as a buffer against vulnerability. We use it to fill the emptiness in our souls. We use it to feel less susceptible to the vagaries of life. It keeps us from seeing how needy we are.

The rich man’s secure status in life led him to keep asking the wrong question: What can I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus’ response was that there was nothing he or anyone else could do. And Jesus told him to release his wealth and give it to the poor—to grow closer perhaps to the fragility of life, to take his own place among the poor.

The poor, the sick, the demon-possessed and the children of whom Jesus speaks all live close to the fragility of life. They are thus more likely and more able to respond to a vulnerable Christ. The disciples freed themselves of what would stand between them and that fragility and were somehow able to follow the One whose life would soon be a ransom for many. In many ways we have to be like children, or like those

who know they are really sick or like disciples who have let go of all the things they once relied on—in order even to see how much we need Jesus.

What must we do to inherit eternal life? We must let go of all that we have and all that we do that gets in the way of seeing that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Even then, letting go of it all is beyond our capacity. The hardest news Jesus has is the best news we could get—our salvation is impossible except for God. “But not for God; for God all things are possible.”