

# Preaching against the rich (Mark 10:17-31)

**When the world is in peril and the rich are to blame, such preaching becomes essential.**

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Although it's socially awkward (and financially risky) to preach directly against the rich, such preaching is existentially crucial now more than ever. The richest 10 percent are responsible for over 40 percent of all global greenhouse gas emissions, and the wealthiest 1 percent contribute more than twice as much carbon dioxide as the poorer half of the world. The rich are destroying our planet, and their ideologies, which through political and economic influence become the world ideologies, shape the Dithering, Kim Stanley Robinson's word in his cli-fi (climate fiction) novels for the general tone of the 21st century, in which policymakers do little to nothing to stop what's happening.

Preaching against the rich purely out of an abstract moralism or class resentment is vacuous, the worst sort of jeremiad. But when the world is in peril and the rich are to blame, such preaching becomes essential, all the more so because the impacts of climate change are themselves socially unjust, affecting the poor more than any other group. When harsh preaching against the rich may at the very least offer some defense of the poor and remediation of the climate crisis, it's important to do it.

As Tad DeLay points out in *The Future of Denial: The Ideologies of Climate Change*, it is not solely deniers of the actuality of climate change who practice denial. You can

believe in climate change and yet practice denial. Such practical denial takes many forms, often more distracting and sublimating than outright denial, from purchasing carbon offsets to recycling plastics, actions that make climate change believers feel better about having done something, when often such actions in fact accomplish nothing at best.

Jesus' teachings about the rich have themselves been met by denial, with many over the centuries softening the implications, offering that one can be "poor in spirit" or distracting attention away from the central instructions—go sell what you have and give it to the poor—and instead focusing attention on a hyper-spiritualized, saved-by-faith interpretation of "only God can save."

No single event would have a greater impact on climate change than a wholesale awakening of the rich to their own complicity. Not unlike the rich man, today's rich may simply turn away in shock and grief when they come to real awareness that their obscene lifestyles are cooking all of us. But at least such an awakening could shift corporate and political outcomes from outright denial and into practices of adaptation, mitigation, and solidarity with the most impacted. Such a shift is the most appropriate posture for all of us, even if we are confronted by the dispiriting impossibilities of the climate crisis and hoping in the possibilities of God.