



A HARD SAYING
Mark 10:17-27

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC
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The gospels bring to life the wondrous story of Jesus. We who claim him as Lord and Savior eagerly absorb the compassion, the tenderness in the stories which demonstrate Jesus' care for all persons. He cares for the outsiders, the rejected members of society. He cares for children. Even the loving way he chides stubborn disciples reminds us of what first attracted us to Jesus.

But the gospels offer other glimpses that are not as soft and gentle. On occasion, Jesus presents a different demeanor. He is not as tender in these glimpses, and his words can be most challenging. Such words from Jesus can be termed "hard sayings." Today's text is one of those.

The story is one we know well. It comes at a crucial point in Mark's gospel. Mark 10 is a turning moment, a turning toward Jerusalem and the climactic events which are to unfold there. The stage is set by one of Mark's passion predictions in Mark 9:30-32. There is a consistent response from the disciples to such words. They reject them out of hand. The dramatic contrast between the apparent perceptions of the disciples regarding God's kingdom and that presented by Jesus is a major element in this part of the gospel.

Note a few illustrations of that contrast. Jesus challenged the disciples' focus on hierarchy (who is the greatest?) by demanding emphasis on servanthood. He extended care to the outsider; the disciples tried to silence an exorcist who was not in their guild, Jesus affirmed him. Jesus cared for children; the disciples and society in general would have pushed them to the background.

Jesus elevates the conversation about divorce from the debate underway in Rabbinic circles of his day (Shammai vs. Hillel) to point to a higher view of marriage as part of God's intent in creation. Further, he moves beyond the Jewish discussion about what grounds were appropriate for a man to divorce his wife to emphasize the equality of husband and wife, the mutual responsibility each shares for this holy relationship.

And Jesus had a word about wealth, a hard saying indeed. Consistent with the other vignettes noted, Jesus challenges the assumptions which would have been held by most bystanders, and are demonstrably the assumptions of the disciples.

The man approached Jesus and addressed him as “good Teacher.” We may be puzzled by the edge in Jesus’ response. Why do you call me good, none is good, only God.

Was Jesus not good? What did he mean by this response? Is it possible that Jesus perceived more about the man than we do? Is the man’s flattery sincere or staged? Is he serious about knowing and doing, or is it more of a game, one many religious cheerleaders know all too well.

You know the commandments....Jesus dialogue suggests that he is exploring the depth of the man’s searching, and the potential depth of his commitment. The cheerleading continues with the affirmative response. All of these I have kept from my earliest days. Mark tells us that Jesus “loved him.” The loving response is to issue a stern demand. You lack one thing. Rid yourself of your wealth and follow me.

The man could hardly believe his ears, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. The disciples, too, were shocked. They could not understand. Wealth, after all, was a sign of God’s favor. If one so favored, and so deeply committed to Torah, if such a one cannot measure up, who can?

This is Jesus’ hard saying. Wealth is a rival to allegiance to God. It is nigh unto impossible for those attached to riches to give primary loyalty to God. It is easier for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye than for one who is rich to enter God’s kingdom.

Is it a teachable moment for the disciples? Is it a teachable moment for us? The disciples exhibit patterns of human behavior and patterns of understanding with which we are all familiar. We exhibit the same patterns routinely. They struggle with pride and prejudice. They are concerned with their own status as Jesus’ followers—who will be greatest? They are concerned to exclude those who don’t belong—they seek to silence the exorcist outsider. Jesus offers a different perspective. He elevates the conversation about divorce. He tenderly welcomes children. He challenges the importance of wealth. As is often the case, Jesus turns our normal pyramids on their heads. The last shall be first, the greatest shall be the servant. Wealth does not matter, is even a hindrance.

To follow Jesus requires complete commitment of all we are and all we have. It took the disciples much struggle, and for most, much suffering, before Jesus’ teaching registered. They finally got it, and then changed their world.

What about us? This sermon is not even thinly veiled. It is included as part of a major stewardship emphasis in which you are engaged at FBC Raleigh. But the sermon is not about encouraging better giving patterns, larger offerings, or a

stronger bottom line. At least, my intent is to allow this text to speak to you as it has spoken to me, of a much more important challenge. What does it mean to be a disciple, a follower, of Jesus? Where are the boundaries beyond which I am unwilling to go? Am I a willing religious cheerleader, enjoying the game, welcoming the excitement and celebration, but unwilling to take the crucial steps required to choose God over good?

Stewardship is about more than what I contribute of my financial resources to fund the various expressions of the church's ministry. It is also about who or what I truly follow. If I choose to follow Jesus, there may be a demand which tests how authentic my commitment is. Rid yourself of all the stuff, then come, follow me. What would be our response? It may be that we have already demonstrated that in more ways than we would like to recall.

It is a hard saying. It is about money. It is about what money represents for us, how we use it, how we hoard it, even how we give it away. And, it is about how willing we are to give ourselves away. How many of us walk sadly away from the demands to be true followers of Jesus.

May God grant us the courage and the wisdom to hear and respond to Jesus' hard sayings. May our response demonstrate to our world what truly matters, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. ■