



AMY-JILL
LEVINE

The
DIFFICULT
WORDS *of*
JESUS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to HIS MOST PERPLEXING TEACHINGS

The Difficult Words of Jesus

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*With love to Maria Mayo,
editor and friend,
and her son Walter,
as they go forward into the next generation
of wrestling with difficult words.*

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INTRODUCTION

Addressing Difficult Passages

All Scriptures have passages with which people of conscience wrestle, and all liturgies at one time or another make proclamations that members of the congregation question. The role of a religious community is not to be like sheep, despite all the sheep and shepherd metaphors in both the Jewish and Christian Bibles. Without casting any aspersions on sheep (one of God's creatures, although not necessarily the brightest), we can have better career aspirations than to become better bleaters. Since the name "Israel" traditionally means "to wrestle with God," we do well to wrestle with passages that confuse and disturb us. More, we do well to wrestle with passages that have and can continue to cause harm.

Our Difficult Sayings

This book looks at six major verses as well as several others that have confused, confounded, and in some cases harmed. We start with questions of economics, an issue in antiquity as it is today. Is everyone to "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (so Mark 10:21)? What did Jesus mean when he said, "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” (Mark 10:25)? The chapter opens questions of stewardship, community responsibilities, vocations, and even asset management.

Questions of economics necessarily relate to questions of families. In chapter 2, we address Jesus’s comment, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27). To understand this difficult saying as well as a number of others related to it, we need to understand what discipleship may have looked like in the first century, what “taking up the cross” would have signaled, and how Jesus reconfigured what we would call “family values.”

The household in antiquity was more than just “father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters”: many households, especially in the Roman world, included slaves. The topic of slavery in the Bible usually finds its focus in the so-called household codes, such as Ephesians 6:5-8, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.” Yet slaves fully populate the Gospels, whether in parables or in households or even in the Passion narratives. Given our global history of slavery and how the toxicity of slavery on American soil continues to impact our lives, how are we to assess Jesus’s

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instruction, “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:44)? Why is it that for some Christians, this image is helpful, but for others, it is impossible?

Our next difficult saying relates to another contemporary issue, that of insiders and outsiders, from church membership to citizenship to ethnic identity. Not only does Jesus instruct his disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5b-6), he also refers to a Gentile woman (a “Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth” in Mark; a “Canaanite” from the region of Tyre and Sidon in Matthew) as a dog, which then, as now, was an all-purpose rather than specifically ethnic insult. On the other hand, Matthew’s Gospel ends with what is known as the “Great Commission,” Matthew 28:19—Jesus’s command that his followers “make disciples of all nations” (or, perhaps “all Gentiles”). These passages and others raise questions of community definition as well as of the place of both universalism and particularism. When do we stress our common humanity, and when do we celebrate our distinct heritages? More, how does one evangelize—literally to “proclaim the good news” of Jesus—in an era of interfaith relations when people who are not Christians believe they have good news of their own or, worse, perceive Christian evangelism to be a sign of intolerance and therefore bigotry?

In chapter 5, we turn to what, at least in my anecdotal impression, may be the most problematic collection of statements attributed to Jesus. Not only does Jesus promote for his disciples the image of a slave, he also threatens them should they fail in their responsibilities: “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30). The

threat of hell remains a concern for many, whether because they have done something they think is unforgivable or because they doubt some of the teachings of their church or because they fear a wrathful and arbitrary God or because they doubt that they are “good enough” for God. The fear of hell is pervasive, even in congregations that take a liberal approach to Scripture. How are we to assess the threats of final judgment, and how can we foster a faith based in love and joy rather than fear of punishment?

Finally, and I think most difficult, in chapter 6 we look at several texts whose interpretations have contributed to the origin of the ghetto, to persecutions, to genocide, and to synagogue shootings in our own time. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells the “Jews” (Greek: *Ioudaioi*), “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44a). Today, white nationalists and followers of some African American religious groups in the United States, misguided individuals who claim to be representing the true Christianity or the true Islam, speak of Jews as representing the “synagogue of Satan,” which happens to be a phrase found twice in the New Testament: Revelation 2:9 and 3:9. How do we address name-calling? How do we address demonization? What can be done when a text is known to do harm, or, better, how do we exorcise such texts of their potentially demonic threat?

Our Approach

The Gospels do not have a lock on difficult sayings. From Paul’s epistles, we have comments such as “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they

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desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” (1 Corinthians 14:33b-36) and “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

From the shared Scriptures, there are also difficult passages. When my son turned thirteen, he became bar mitzvah, an Aramaic term meaning “son of the commandment.” Becoming bar mitzvah (or for girls, bat mitzvah) means assuming all of Judaism’s rights and responsibilities. This coming of age is often marked by chanting the Torah reading in the synagogue and then giving a public explication of a part of the passage read.

The passage read is keyed to one’s birthday. (The Torah reading and the accompanying reading from the Prophets, known as the Haftarah, function somewhat like the various Christian lectionaries). My son, Alexander, has an August birthday (there was at the time at Swarthmore College no stopping of the tenure clock for childbirth, so faculty got the message that the nonacademic act of having a baby should be scheduled between the end of May and the middle of August), which finds us in Deuteronomy. His reading was Parashat Shoftim, Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9, the reading that contains the verse, “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.” Had he

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been inclined to take the easy route, he would have spoken about justice. But the easy path is not always the best.

As he read on, he came to Deuteronomy 20:14-17: “You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. . . . But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded.”

Alexander was appalled at the command to commit genocide. “What do you suggest?” he asked me (sometimes it helps to have a parent who is a biblical scholar). “What do you suggest?” he asked his father (sometimes it helps to have a parent who teaches graduate-level courses on the Holocaust). We told him to speak with the rabbi. This was to be his talk, and we did not want people to think that we had written it for him.

He asked his sister, whose own parashah for her June birthday included Numbers 5, the “test of bitter waters” to be imposed on any woman whose husband thinks she has been unfaithful. The Haftarah pairing for this text is Judges 13, the birth of Samson. Sarah concluded that the people who put the pairing of Numbers 5 and Judges 13 together thought that the test of bitter waters was sexist and unfair. Good for her! She told Alexander that if he did not like a text, he should say so and then determine what to do with it.

Alexander spoke with the rabbi, who wisely advised him to look at Jewish commentaries. For Alexander to take his place

in interpreting the text, he needed to know what others in the Jewish tradition had said.

His dad and I were happy to provide him the books and articles we had, and he found other commentaries in the synagogue library. From author to author, from antiquity to the present, he found not acceptance of but wrestling with the text.

One commentator suggested that these words from Deuteronomy should be interpreted allegorically: we are to erase our base instincts or evil thoughts, with the seven nations of Canaan symbolizing pride, lust, greed, etc. Another interpreted this problematic passage in light of a different verse and concluded that it means fight only after you've tried all other options and your life is at risk: "When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace" (Deuteronomy 20:10). A third noted that the Bible speaks only about ancient nations and nothing about Israel under the monarchy: the wars against the populations of Canaan were only for the past and should never be seen as a model for the present. Several commentators noted that the Talmud, a compendium of Jewish teaching from the first several centuries of the Common Era, never endorses holy war and goes out of its way to downplay any sort of war.

The group of commentaries Alexander found of greatest help insisted that the so-called conquest commanded in Deuteronomy and depicted in the Book of Joshua never happened: not only is there no archaeological evidence for the conquest but also the Book of Judges contradicts the idea of an ancient blitzkrieg. As many readers have noted, whereas Deuteronomy 7:2 states, "You must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy,"

the next verse reads, “Do not intermarry with them.” Were the Canaanites killed, there would be no reason to forbid intermarriage. Rather, this approach suggested that the entire conquest narrative is a dream of a nation, itself conquered by Babylon, trying to create new memories about a glorious past. Indeed, the presence of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 indicates that members of those original population groups survived.

In his *d'var Torah*, his interpretation, Alexander announced to the congregation, “I do not like this text.” Then he continued, “but I am proud to be a part of a tradition that allows me to wrestle with it.” His father, his sister, and I were proud of him.

Scriptural Authority

Some readers may well resist any wrestling. I have had students tell me that because the text is the “Word of God,” then we cannot disagree with it: everything is divinely dictated and therefore everything is both holy and good. Since the text is from God, it cannot be guilty of any of the sins we can list, whether ancient ones such as bearing false witness against the neighbor, or ones only recognized as time passed, such as racism, sexism, and so on. Rather than argue against this view of biblical authority, I find it more helpful to note that all texts need to be interpreted. Laws need clarification, and stories will always be open to multiple interpretations. For example, people with a high view of biblical authority saw in Genesis 1:26 the good news that all humanity is in the image and likeness of God and noted both that Jesus prioritized the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18) as part of the “Great Commandment”

(Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; cf. Romans 13:9), and that he insisted, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). Therefore, they concluded that slavery was sinful, despite the fact that Jesus does not critique it and Paul appears to endorse it. Believing that a text is divinely inspired should not mean parking our moral compass at Genesis 1 and only picking it back up at the end of Revelation.

Alternatively, we might distinguish between a text that was meant for a specific time and place and a text that has universal and global import. Still others might see the text as a human product, with all the flaws that we humans have. And yet others will rely on the text as it has been interpreted within their particular tradition: for example, Roman Catholic Christians have different teachings on certain matters than do Greek Orthodox Christians, Lutherans and Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians, and so on; all have ongoing resources.

In no case will we fully understand what a Scripture means. We can make educated guesses as to what Jesus said and did, but we do not have access to him directly; rather, we only have the memories, as flawed as memories always are, of what the Gospel writers, themselves not necessarily eyewitnesses, recorded. Moreover, Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the New Testament is written in Greek, and we are reading the English translation. (I’ll be fussing, all the way through this volume, with the New Revised Standard Version, which is the translation used by many mainline churches.)

We can make educated guesses on how Mark’s initial readers, or Luke’s Theophilus, to whom the Gospel and Acts are dedicated, may have understood specific passages given

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their own settings in life. A rich slave owner may take a different message from a statement about slavery than would a slave woman; a Jew may hear references to being “children of the devil” differently than a Gentile. And inevitably, a twenty-first-century reader will ask different questions and derive different answers than would a first-century reader.

There is a blessed freedom here. If a text is to be Scripture—not just a form of ancient literature like the works of Homer or Plato or Virgil but Scripture, a text that helps to form and maintain a community—it has to speak from the past to the present. It has to have meaning for us today. Consequently, we need to engage these texts to find the reading that provides good news. More, we need to ensure that a Gospel of love not be heard as a Gospel that makes us sanctimonious, neurotic, fearful, tearful, or bigoted.

Take a deep breath before you begin. These texts are difficult, and the journey can be treacherous. But if you persevere, the rewards are enormous.

Chapter 1

SELL WHAT YOU OWN

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "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."

Mark 10:21

The Gospel of Mark recounts a short anecdote about a rich man who meets Jesus on the road. Running up to him and kneeling before him, the fellow asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). In typical "Jesus fashion," Jesus answers his question with another question, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (10:18). (Answering a question with a question is sometimes called the Socratic method. I think Socrates learned this from the Jews; my rabbi does the same thing.)

Jesus proceeds to answer the man's question by reciting the second part of the Decalogue, the "ten" (Greek: *deca*, "ten") "words" (Greek: *logos*, "word"), otherwise known as the Ten Commandments. "You know the commandments," he says, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness;" and then, before he backtracks to the fifth commandment, "Honor your father

and mother,” he tosses in a commandment that is technically not part of the famous ten. Jesus says, “You shall not defraud” (10:19).

The questioner, likely with a bit of pride (there’s no “commandment” against pride, although the Book of Proverbs frequently warns against it), responds, “Teacher” (here, dropping the “good”—the fellow is teachable), “I have kept all these since my youth” (10:20). There is no reason to doubt him; most of us, I suspect, tend to think of ourselves as law-abiding, as keeping to the straight path. But something is bothering him, and Jesus, being an excellent reader of human nature, knows it.

Looking at the man, Jesus “loved him” (10:21). We should stop briefly at the “looking”: Jesus is reading the man’s facial expression and his body language. The fellow is just as in need of Jesus’s words as were the man suffering from leprosy in Mark 1 and the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5. He is what we would call “soul sick,” and he has not found a physician to cure him or a teacher to provide him the answers he seeks. Indeed, to ask about inheriting eternal life is to ask about death.

Jesus loves this man—the only time Mark mentions Jesus’s love for an individual. Mark’s Gospel is stingy with its references to love. The term appears in only three other verses: once in the citation of the famous line from Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (12:30), once with the equally famous citation of Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (12:31), and twice more as a gloss on these two biblical citations (12:33). How astounding that the one person Jesus explicitly loves is

this earnest young man, who will turn out to be, at least within the contours of Mark's narrative, a failed disciple.

Jesus diagnoses the problem; he realizes what is missing in this man's life. "You lack one thing," he says. Jesus knows that the human heart has multiple needs, and that the gospel is not a one-size-fits-all model. People are called to different tasks, as Paul wrote to his congregations: there are apostles, prophets, doers of mighty works, healers, those who assist, those who lead, those who speak in tongues, those who teach, those who evangelize, those who become pastors, and so on (1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11). Each role is fulfilling, and each helps to build up and support the community. We all have distinct gifts, and we all have personal needs.

To address this man's feeling of lack, to cure his soul-sickness, Jesus paradoxically first increases the lack by telling him, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor" (10:21a). The questioner felt that something was missing, and Jesus's first move is to make that missing sense tangible. It's one thing to feel a gap in one's heart and one's soul; it's something else to experience a gap in the pocketbook and bank account.

Jesus then tells him what he needs, and the need is not to focus on eternal life. Rather, first, he needs to refocus his attention from his treasures on earth—his estate, his investments, his mammon—by laying up treasures in heaven. Second, now that he has divested of his earthly goods, he is to become the type of disciple who follows Jesus on the road: "Then come, follow me," Jesus says (10:21).

The story does not have a happy ending. The questioner is shocked, *shocked!* The very idea of liquidating a large estate is daunting: Jesus does not say to "give what you have to the

poor” but to *sell everything* and then distribute the money. To sell what one has requires putting a monetary value on one’s possessions and so taking the time to think about what they are worth. Once we know what they are worth, we have a better sense of what we are giving up.

I think this man is single. His parents, whom he loved, have probably died; there is no wife (or wives, since the society was polygynous) and there are no children. Had he a family, he might be less worried about inheriting eternal life. He could live on through his children and his grandchildren. I also think he was single because had he a family, his divesting would impoverish the wife and the children.

Mark reports that the would-be disciple “went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (10:22).

Jesus looks at his disciples—the ones who did not walk away—and announces, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (10:23). We might take heart, since “hard” is not the same thing as “impossible.” The disciples are amazed (the NRSV reads “perplexed”). I picture them with their mouths agape. Jesus, knowing their confusion as he knew the heart of the would-be disciple, rephrases his statement. Breaking down the details so that even the disciples—in Mark’s Gospel, they are not the sharpest knives in the drawer or the brightest students in the seminar—Jesus explains: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God” (10:24). He then moves from the possible-but-difficult to the impossible. Here in Mark 10:25 Jesus utters the famous proverb, “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.”

Rather than ask Jesus for an explanation, the disciples start asking each other, “Who can be saved?” They should, as

disciples, have asked Jesus directly. Given the impossibility of the camel going through the eye of the needle, it's a good question. Although the disciples did not ask him, Jesus provides them a word of comfort by returning to the "hard but not impossible" idea: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (10:27). Peter then assures Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you" (10:28). (I think he kept the house in Capernaum, although perhaps it belonged to his mother-in-law.)

Mark's passage raises numerous questions. Among them, we start with the identity of this questioner whom Jesus loved. Would we assess him differently if we knew his age or how he obtained his many possessions? What is his fate, since the last we see him, he is going away from Jesus and, apparently, toward his "many possessions"? Do we identify with him, the man who seemingly has everything, or do we see ourselves more identified with the poor, barefoot and hungry? Indeed, why only here does Mark indicate that Jesus loved a particular person, and why *this* man, this apparently failed disciple?

Next, how do we assess his address to Jesus as "Good Teacher" and Jesus's rejection of the title "Good"? Is "Geacher" a good address for Jesus, or would "lord" or "rabbi" have been better? What might "Good" signal in relation to one's desire to "be good" or to follow Torah?

Third, what should we make of Jesus's very odd citation of the Ten Commandments? Not only does he add in *defraud*, he puts the fifth commandment about honoring father and mother last. Fourth, why does Jesus tell his questioner to sell all he has?

Finally, what do we do with the saying about the camel and the needle, and how does it relate to the view that with God all things are possible?

The answers depend in great measure on how we understand this would-be disciple, and how we understand ourselves.

The Questioner

I like this fellow. I like people who ask questions and who have the courage to seek out teachers or scientists or lawyers who might have the right answer. When I was little, my father would ask me about an hour before my bedtime to bring him one of the volumes of the old *Jewish Encyclopedia*. He'd put an opera on the stereo (Puccini, Vivaldi, Rossini, never Wagner) and then say, "Tell me a word that begins with..." for whatever the letters on the volume were. Then he would read to me about that word, sometimes a name (the first volume was terrific for Bible people: Adam, Abel, Abraham, Abimelech, Abigail, Amos). I once asked for "Amy-Jill." "Not yet," my father said.

Mark does not give us many details about the would-be disciple, other than that he has many possessions. We might see him as a person of privilege who is used to getting what he wants. In Mark's version, which is longer than the retellings in Matthew and Luke, he runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. Jesus is not in a house or in a synagogue, where he could receive people who needed his healing, his exorcism, his blessing, his wisdom, and where his disciples would be in a better position to direct traffic. He is outside, on the way, and the fellow stops him by kneeling in front of him. He gives Jesus little choice in the matter of whether to listen to him or not. He will be heard.

Matthew and Luke, in recounting the same story, provide embellishments even as they remove some of Mark's details.

Matthew 19:20, 22 adds that the fellow was a “young man.” The detail makes the fellow more sympathetic: this “young man” did not yet have a socially responsible position; others were not dependent upon him; he had no wife and no children. Perhaps he had yet to garner the reputation that he wanted, whether for profit or for piety. Perhaps he has the idealism of youth, the sense that he can fix the world quickly, with a protest sign, a sit-in by the dean’s office, a well-placed tweet. He also has time to grow in wisdom, if he can develop the capacity for patience.

Why this “young man” would be worried about inheriting eternal life remains unclear. Many of the young people I know are fearless: they are not worried about eternal life as much as they are concerned to live life to the fullest. Some have a sense of immortality, or of years to come. Why settle down now when there is so much to see and to do? Perhaps he had had a brush with death. Perhaps his parents had died, and he is now feeling vulnerable, or coming face-to-face with his own mortality. The young man may give us pause to wonder about how much time we have, and what we want to spend our days doing.

Luke takes the identification in another way by calling this fellow an *archōn*, Greek for “ruler” or “first one” (Luke 18:18). Luke, who likes the term “ruler,” uses it five other times in the Gospel to refer to people with economic or political influence, such as Jairus, the *archōn* of the synagogue whose daughter Jesus raises from the dead (8:41), an *archōn* of the Pharisees who hosts Jesus at a banquet (14:1); and the local leaders in Jerusalem whom Pilate assembles together with the chief priests (23:13; cf. 23:35; 24:20). We might think of their modern equivalents as people on the A-list, people with

social capital, people who have the community's attention and respect: economic leaders, doctors and lawyers, elite athletes, clergy (maybe), professors (we should be so lucky); in any case, we know who they are.

More, Luke (18:23) embellishes Mark's note that the would-be disciple had "many possessions" by calling him *plousios sphodra*, "exceedingly rich." The term for "rich," *plousios*, is where we get terms like "plutocrat" and "plutocracy." This exceedingly rich ruler may be wondering about eternal life because he has everything on earth he could possibly want. He inherited the good life from his parents, and now he wants more. Instead of minding the gap between the "haves" such as himself and the "have nots" who would be most of the population, he wants to be among the "have mores." While Mark tells us that Jesus loved the earnest fellow who spoke to him, Luke along with Matthew drops out that notice.

How we understand our questioner will depend, in part, on how we picture him. Do we see him as 15, or 50? Is he the child of a wealthy family who wants to make a difference in the world, or is he the secure executive who has worked all his life, become successful according to worldly standards, but still feels empty? Would we think of him differently if we knew he had a spouse and a family? Would the story change meaning if this fellow were a woman?

Tradition merges all three accounts and so calls our disciple the "rich, young, ruler." I imagine a scion of a prominent family, graduate of all the right schools and member of all the right clubs. Our would-be disciple feels the need to excel, to do more than is expected. He wants the next challenge, and at the same time he wants to be able to succeed without working too hard.

I also picture this young man as knowing Jesus's reputation as a teacher and healer and as anticipating that Jesus would answer his question by saying, "You're doing just fine, dear lad, just fine; just keep doing what you're doing and you'll have no trouble living either in this world or in the kingdom of heaven." He wants the affirmation, the accolade. Other times I see him as feeling an emptiness in his life and as thinking that Jesus can provide him the answer he seeks.

As the old saying goes, "Be careful what you ask for."

"Good Teacher..."

Jesus is for Mark the preeminent teacher. As early as 1:22, we read that the people in the synagogue at Capernaum were "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (see also Matthew 7:29, where the same comment describes the crowd's reaction to the Sermon on the Mount). That is, Jesus does not speak about what he learned from other teachers, as would the scribes; he speaks for himself. The crowds continue to be astounded at his teaching when they realize that even unclean spirits obey him (1:27), they listen to his teaching in parables (4:2), and others identify him as "the Teacher." The disciples call him "Teacher" when he falls asleep in the boat during a storm and they are fearing for their lives (4:38); friends of Jairus and his wife speak of Jesus as the teacher, who should not be bothered now that the little girl has died (5:35). Jesus spends his time teaching in the Galilean villages (6:6). A few verses before our problematic sayings about economics, a man cries out to Jesus from the crowd, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak" (9:17).

There are two more references to teaching and teacher before our story. In Mark 9:31, Jesus teaches his disciples that

he will be betrayed, be put to death, and rise again. Finally, in Mark 9:38, John the disciple tells Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

The title “teacher” and the term “teaching” will continue to appear in the Gospel. I cite these examples because they tell us something about the type of teacher Jesus is. Mark’s Gospel has no Sermon on the Mount as we find in Matthew, or Sermon on the Plain (please, not “Plane”) that we find in Luke. In fact, we get very little teaching material in Mark aside from chapter 4, in which Mark collects several parables. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’s teaching is in the doing: in healing, in exorcism, in bringing hope to parents with sick children, in rescuing disciples from death. His teaching is more by example than by words, more by action than by lecture.

Our questioner calls Jesus “Good Teacher.” Had he been paying attention to Jesus, he would have known from Jesus’s life, which is his teaching, that there are more steps he could have taken. He would have known that the disciples had left their homes. He would have known that Jesus takes no money for his acts of healing. He might have even heard Jesus tell his disciples, back in chapter 8, “that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). Strikingly, Mark then observes that after eight chapters of parables and other enigmatic sayings, now Jesus “said all this quite openly” (Mark 8:32).

It’s not even clear from Mark that “Teacher” is the best title for Jesus. Now, I am not knocking the profession of teaching. I’m a teacher, and I regard teaching as an honorable profession. Nevertheless, despite all the book knowledge we

might have, the real lessons in life are learned less in the academic classroom than in the exchanges we have with each other, in conversation, in emergency rooms and grocery stores, in Sunday school gatherings, sewing circles, football stadiums, in our homes, and now on Zoom. For Mark's Jesus, the most important teaching is the doing: the rescuing, indeed, the "saving"—with all the connotations of the term—from demons, disease, and death.

When in Mark's Gospel someone calls Jesus "Teacher," there's usually a problem with the type of teaching then requested, for the title tends to come with a sense of doubt or limitation. For example, in Mark 4:38, the first use of the title, the disciples—seasoned men of the sea—panic when the boat in which they are riding finds itself in a storm. Jesus is asleep in the boat and so evidently not worried at all, but the disciples wake him up and ask, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Of course he cares about them, and of course they are not going to perish. Had they thought of Jesus as "Lord" rather than as "teacher," they would likely have been more assured. Had they remembered their own competency at the helm, they could have let Jesus sleep a little longer.

In the next chapter, as Jesus is on his way to the home of Jairus, the synagogue *archōn*, some people say to Jairus, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further" (5:35). Had they thought of Jesus as "Lord" rather than as teacher, they might have told Jairus to have faith rather than to desist. There are similar problems with most of the petitioners who use the title "teacher," as you can see, for example, with Mark 9:17, 38; 10:35; 12:14, 19; and 13:1. Mark's point is that if we simply think about Jesus as a great teacher, we miss the most important thing about him: that, according to Mark's Gospel, he suffers and dies as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Similarly, if we look at him only as the “answer man”—a combination of Dear Abby, Bill Nye the Science Guy, Dr. Ruth, and Judge Judy—then we miss the point as well, for Jesus does not provide a set of answers for every question. The questions we ask may need to be rephrased; the answers we seek may not be the answers we need; the answers we need when we are six are not necessarily the answers we need when we are sixty.

The Bible is less a book of answers than a book that helps us ask the right questions. (I’ve made this point in other publications, but it bears repeating.) Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Mark, will not answer all our questions.

He leaves much as mystery to be marveled at rather than to be explained. He has the attributes of God, for he can forgive sins, control the weather, raise the dead, and walk on water. And yet, he is “unable” to do mighty works in Nazareth, because of the people’s “unbelief” (Mark 6:5-6). And yet, he cries from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; cf. Matthew 27:46, a citation of Psalm 22:1). Jesus does not teach by answering the questions of why suffering happens. Jesus teaches by showing that he understands suffering and by insisting that suffering cannot be the end of the story. He teaches by dying, and in Mark’s Gospel, he leaves it up to the readers to continue from an empty tomb to life abundant.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Our questioner calls Jesus “teacher” because he wants the answer to the query, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). This is not the only time someone in a Gospel poses that question. In the run-up to the Parable of

the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25, a lawyer seeks to test Jesus by asking him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question, so phrased, could serve as a trap, which is what “to test” signifies (the word in Greek for “to bring to the test” is the same word that gets translated “to tempt” as in “lead us not into temptation”).

In Luke’s scene, Jesus responds with a question (that Socratic method again): “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” (Luke 10:26). The lawyer opts not for a few of the Ten Commandments but for Deuteronomy 6:5 on love of God and Leviticus 19:18 on love of neighbor. Jesus tells him, “You have given the right answer,” but then changes the focus from eternal life to life in the here and now by saying, “Do this, and you shall live,” rather than “Do this, and you will have eternal life.” Jesus is much more focused on how we love our neighbor as ourselves than on suggesting that following one commandment is all a person needs to do.

To say that only one commandment is necessary is to miss the point. Following Torah (the Law) is not a checklist; it is a lifestyle. Those various “thou shalt” like honoring parents and caring for the vulnerable in society (the traditional listing is the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger) are not a one and done but a way of living. The same point holds for the “thou shalt not.” One does not “earn” eternal life, as if it were a race or a degree for which one needs required courses or a wage for working 24/7.

I’m not a fan of this lawyer in Luke and I’m not a fan of his question. I don’t appreciate questions that are designed to trip up the speaker or put the speaker in a compromised position.

With Mark’s questioner, whom Jesus loved, I am more sympathetic. On the one hand, he is being selfish and perhaps

morbid. He is interested not in being rescued from demons, like the naked man living in the tombs; he's not interested in saving a child on the brink of death, as was Jairus. He's rich and healthy and self-confident. He's got money in the bank, and he wants to make sure that he's got a reservation for that great vault in the sky. He has wealth, and now he wants to "inherit" (a monetary metaphor) even more. He's interested in himself, period. I'm not sure I'd want my children to date him.

On the other hand, self-interest is not a bad thing; to the contrary, it's necessary. We cannot take care of others unless we take care of ourselves. As Hillel is reputed to have said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?" (Pirkei Avot 1:14). Self-advocacy is a good thing, as long as we are careful in determining what we need, when, and for or from whom. If we are impoverished, we need to ask for money. If we are suffering, we need to ask for something that will alleviate the suffering. If we are mourning, we need to ask for comfort and for time. But if we are healthy and wealthy, we also need to be wise.

Had I the chance to ask Jesus something, my first thought would not be about inheriting eternal life. I would have figured that was already in God's hands. The Book of Daniel states, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life [Hebrew: *T'chaye olam*; fans of *Fiddler on the Roof* might recall the song, "*L'chayim*, to Life"], and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:2-3). The Mishnah states that "all Israel has a share in the world to come" (m. Sanhedrin 10:1). The God proclaimed by

Judaism and so by Jesus is a God of mercy and compassion. For those of us who sin, and we all will, repentance is possible, and encouraged.

What would we ask Jesus, if we had the chance to pose a question?

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Many of my students do not like this verse. Seeing Jesus as divine, the Second Person of the Trinity, and so as God, they resist the idea that Jesus should not be called good. They are not alone. The Evangelist Matthew, also troubled by this seeming demotion of Jesus, rephrased the question to “Why do you ask me about what is good?” (Matthew 19:17).

I doubt Jesus is judging the fellow negatively here: students can phrase a question incorrectly, but that does not make them evil or stupid. This is a teaching moment. Jesus is about to teach something concerning himself.

The Epistle to the Hebrews states that Jesus is a high priest who is not only able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” but also who “in every respect been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). I’d like to think that Jesus knew what it was like to sin, because that way he would also fully understand how guilt and shame work, and how repentance and forgiveness feel. These, too, are part of the human condition. But rather than argue with the Epistle to the Hebrews or with Christian doctrine, I can reframe the question.

According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus does not sin. But according to the Gospels, he can learn, he can grow in maturity, he can grow in empathy. Luke tells us that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human

favor” (Luke 2:52). Mark 7 (and see chapter 3 in this book) recounts that a Syro-Phoenician woman was able to get Jesus to change his mind: first he refused to perform an exorcism for her child, but when she parried his own words back to him, he said, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29).

Here, Jesus’s gentle chiding takes us back to the would-be disciple’s question. We do not pick and choose which commandments to follow, or when. Our concern should be less whether we are “good” (“good teacher,” “good pastor,” “good gardener,” “good nurse,” and so on) but whether each day we act for the good. And if we get off track, we repent, make amends, and carry on.

“You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’”

Jesus’s questioner does not need to ask what he should do. He already knows, as Jesus points out: “You know the commandments.” For the vast majority of people, following our part of covenantal obligations is sufficient. Our role is not to be God; our role is to be the best people we can be, and for Jews, that means attention to God’s Word, conveyed in Scripture, always interpreted by the community, and always attentive to the weightier commandments of Deuteronomy 6 (love of God) and Leviticus 19 (love of both neighbor and stranger) as well as the Decalogue (Exodus 20). The Gospel later reinforces these weightier commandments. When a scribe asks Jesus which of the 613 commandments is the greatest, Jesus responds, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord

our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

By listing for his questioner several of the Ten Commandments, Jesus is not saying, “That’s all you need to do”—he is using a few to speak for the whole. We could do a twelve-part lesson, one on each of the Ten Commandments and another two on love of God and love of neighbor. Here, however, we need to be especially attuned to both Jesus’s replacement of “do not covet” with “do not defraud,” and his placing of love of parents at the end of the list rather than at the beginning.

The Decalogue’s last commandment is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17). Had I the chance to chat with Moses, I’d suggest rephrasing. The language presumes that the wife is property, comparable to an ox or a tackle box or a pinkie ring. The language presumes that slavery is normative rather than, as most of humanity has finally come to realize, an abomination. Sexism and slavery dehumanize us all, each in the image and likeness of God.

Jesus replaces “You shall not covet” with “You shall not defraud.” The terms *covet* and *defraud* are not equivalent. Covet is an attitude; defraud is an action. The shift is notable, so much so that Luke (18:20) and Matthew (19:18) drop the reference to defrauding. It would be nice to think that Jesus dropped coveting because he found sexism and slavery abhorrent, but I do not think this is the case. There must be another reason.

To understand this shift, the first move I make as a biblical scholar (yes, I'm showing off, but just a bit) is to understand what *defraud* connotes (the Greek for "do not defraud" is *mē apostērēses*) and by seeing where else it appears. A concordance search sends us first to Paul's epistles. In 1 Corinthians 6:7-8, Paul accuses his Gentile believers of defrauding each other, especially by suing them in court. *Defraud* thus sounds like using the technicalities of the legal system to get money from others in the community: it might be legal, but it is not right.

Along with a few other uses of the term, the most important for comparison to Mark 10 appears in James 5:4, "Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud [Greek: *aposterēmenos*, the same verb], cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." For this letter, which bears numerous similarities to the Sermon on the Mount and which likely contains good memories of what Jesus taught, defrauding is the practice of the rich landowner; the victims are the day laborers.

Next, the word search brings me to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and to the last of the Book of the Twelve. Malachi 3:5 reads, "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who defraud (following the Hebrew, the NRSV reads "oppress"; the Greek is our same verb, *aposterountas*) the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts." The Septuagint details the types of oppression God condemns. The point is repeated in the Deuterocanonical texts (the Old Testament Apocrypha)

by Jesus the son of Sirach, “My child, do not cheat the poor of their living, / and do not keep needy eyes waiting” (Sirach 4:1).

Jesus reads minds, or better, he reads hearts. When Jesus “perceived in his spirit that [some of the scribes] were discussing these questions [about who can forgive sins], he said “to them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?’” (Mark 2:8). And when Jesus says in Matthew 6:24 (compare to Luke 16:13), “You cannot serve God and [mammon]” (the Aramaic term for “wealth”), he wasn’t kidding.

We need neither a concordance nor a mind reader to know something about how economics works, then and to a great extent today. As the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. Leviticus 19:13 points out the connection of defrauding with exploiting the day laborer: “You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.” Deuteronomy 24:14-15 repeats this concern about the working poor: “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.” From Torah to Prophets to Wisdom literature, defrauding is connected with the rich who exploit the labor of the poor.

Thus, might Jesus have known how his rich questioner got his money? Did he inherit it from a parent who defrauded others? Did he work the system legally, but not righteously? By changing the focus of the Decalogue, Jesus asks: Do we know where our inheritance comes from, or how it was obtained? One modern way of understanding that question is to ask,

“Do we know where our privilege comes from?” Can we even see it?

The Scriptures’ ongoing concern for the socially vulnerable fostered the view that the rich were sinners. Otherwise put: the Bible as well as the noncanonical texts written by Jews in the Second Temple period proclaim the opposite of the prosperity gospel.

I have heard from a number of Christians that “Jews associate wealth with righteousness” (this is news to me) because of Deuteronomy 28:1-6 and Proverbs 10:22. This is a misstatement, indeed a maligning of the Jewish tradition. The passage from Deuteronomy is not about individuals but about the blessings the entire covenant community would find by following Torah, but following Torah itself requires extending the hand to the poor and welcoming the stranger. No one regarded the poor or the stranger as somehow less righteous. Proverbs 10:22 states, “The blessing of the LORD makes rich, / and he adds no sorrow with it.” The point is not equating wealth with righteousness; to the contrary, it reminds us first to accredit our successes to God and, second, that we should not strive for more wealth. As the noncanonical but very popular book known as 1 Enoch puts it, “When you are dead in the wealth of your sins, those who are like you will say of you, ‘Happy are you sinners! (The sinners) have seen all their days. They have died now in prosperity and wealth. They have not experienced struggle and battle in their lifetime’... You yourselves know that they will bring your souls down to Sheol; and they shall experience evil and great tribulation” (1 Enoch 103:5-7).¹

The second odd part of our verse in Mark’s Gospel is the placement of honoring father and mother not as the first

commandment listed, but as the last. Jesus had already cited this commandment in his discussion with the Pharisees about ritual handwashing: “For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die’” (Mark 7:10).

Honoring parents is more than supporting them in their old age. Jeremiah quotes the old saying, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, / and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jeremiah 31:29; cf. Ezekiel 18:2). The saying also works in reverse. When children behave inappropriately, the parent may well feel responsible. To this day, when we hear of a child arrested for burglary or drug dealing, some of us think, “No discipline at home,” or, “That’s what happens with a mom [always the mom] who works.” No matter how much love and modeling of correct behavior, no matter how much time and effort we put into raising our children, they will do what they want, and they do not always make the right choices.

Whether this would-be disciple has fully honored his mother and father is an open question. He may think he has. But Jesus knows the commandments, and this one speaks to his questioner in at least two ways. First, the fifth commandment, “honor your father and your mother,” comes with a result: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). The focus of the commandments is on life in the here and now, not in the sweet by-and-by.

Second, piling up wealth is not the best way of honoring one’s parents. Since it is the task of the parents to “recite [these words, i.e., the Torah God gave Moses on Mount Sinai] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you

rise” (Deuteronomy 6:7, the verse that follows “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”), the parents should have taught their son the rest of Deuteronomy, including “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (15:11) and “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns” (24:14). To honor his parents, the would-be disciple should be known for his good works, especially care for the poor, and not for his wealth.

He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

I appreciate his earnestness, and I do not see him as exaggerating. Paul describes himself as having been “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:6b). Keeping the commandments is not difficult, and if one steps off the path, repentance is always possible.

But keeping the commandments is not quite the same thing as living the commandments.

Our questioner, on his own, may have done all that was nominally expected of him, but he did not think beyond himself. When ancient Israel accepted the Torah Moses taught them, they announced, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will hear” (the NRSV reads “we will be obedient”; Exodus 24:7b). The action is communal. One cannot obey Torah on one’s own, since Torah is necessarily relational: to love the neighbor and to love the stranger require actual neighbors and strangers. We fulfill society’s expectations, but we can always do more.

There's a famous song with the refrain, "I love you just the way you are." People change, times change, and needs change. Ideally, people grow in love. If we stay just the way we are, we become stagnant, and our love threatens to become stagnant as well. True love is manifested when the love grows, and this growth is what Jesus hopes for his eager petitioner.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Only here does Mark tell us that Jesus loved someone, and the object of this love is a man too attached to his money to commit to Jesus fully. This is a beautiful note. Failure to give wholeheartedly does not make one less worthy of love. This "lost sheep" (to borrow a metaphor from Matthew and Luke) still has a chance, and he is no less worthy of love than anyone else. Along with this love likely comes pity, compassion, and hope.

Jesus's love—shown in a look that was not enough to convert the man's heart from mammon to God—is accompanied by his instruction. Love demands. Jesus has diagnosed the man's sense of something missing. He tells the man who seems to have everything that he suffers a lack.

The lack is implied at the end of the statement: "You will have treasure in heaven." That is what he lacks. Living the life of the well-fed and comfortable, he has his heaven on earth. One way of laying up treasure in heaven is almsgiving. The Book of Tobit (from the Deuterocanonical literature/Old Testament Apocrypha) states, "Prayer with fasting is good,

but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life” (Tobit 12:8-9).

For this would-be disciple, who has only laid up treasure on earth, drastic means are necessary. Jesus’s call is for him to divest of everything. Only then would he be able to become a disciple, for as Jesus had recently instructed the crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Ironically, what our fellow lacks is self-denial.

“Sell all you have” cannot be an address for everyone, and Jesus does not tell everyone to engage in this type of divesting. To do so would be both immoral and insufficiently attentive to people’s needs. To tell a rich man, with no dependents, to divest sets up a plausible positive response, since no one is hurt in the process. We might think, for example, of St. Francis of Assisi, who gave up his privileged position for a life of poverty and service. To tell the parent of several children, particularly in a family that is already suffering from food or housing insecurity, to divest is to condemn those children to poverty and the partner to an even harder life.

Money holds our questioner back from a full commitment to Jesus. For others, the stumbling block (the Greek term would be *skandalon*, whence “scandal”) is fame or power, beauty or competition, ego or jealousy, and so on. Of all these concerns, money might be the most pernicious. Ecclesiastes 5:10 had noted that “the lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.” In Mark 4:18-19, Jesus explains that the seeds sown

among the thorns are those “who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.” First Timothy 6:10 concurs: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

To those who insist, “You can never be too rich or too thin,” I respond, “Nonsense” (I’m inclined to use a stronger term, but Abingdon would object). Greed is a disease, and no amount of gain can satisfy it. Jokes about being “too thin” should stop, for distorted body image is also a disease, and victims of anorexia, who feel that they need to be thinner and thinner, can die without intervention. Whoever dies with the most toys does not win. If the best that can be said about you is that you “had the most toys,” then you will find yourself connected to Daniel 12:2, those who sleep in the dust “to shame and everlasting contempt.”

In Matthew’s version of the story, Jesus tells the young man, “*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor*” (Matthew 19:21, author’s emphasis). Earlier in the Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announces, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Here is where we get the medieval distinction between “counsels of salvation” and “counsels of perfection”—while clergy, like the disciples, were to go the perfection route via poverty, the rest of us could stick with the salvation route via following the general teachings of the church (including contributing to its upkeep).

I appreciate Jesus setting the bar high, but I do not think perfection is a human task. We should continually strive to do

better, but perfection is beyond our earthly reach. Matthew later will identify Joseph of Arimathea as a “rich man” (*plousios*; Matthew 27:57): he’s doing just fine.

The story could have ended with Jesus loving the man as he walked away, perhaps praying that he would renounce his wealth, perhaps hoping that he would come to serve God rather than be disciplined to mammon. The man is grieving, or depressed, or even appalled (the Greek *stygnozō* bears all these connotations). The only other time it appears in the New Testament is in Matthew 16:3a, “And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy [*stygnozō*] today, for the sky is red and threatening.’” I picture the young man turning red, his eyes welling with tears, his nose hot with anger, ready to burst. But the story goes on.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.”

Jesus wasn’t kidding. Riches are the major block to the Kingdom. Unequal income distribution, with the rich getting richer and the numbers of the poor increasingly growing globally, is a major reason the world lacks peace. A few early manuscripts of Mark read, “How hard it is for those who trust in riches”—but this is again domesticating Jesus. He is not here talking about “trusting” in wealth but the starker issue of “having” it.

Before Jesus makes his famous pronouncement about the camel and the needle, he addresses his disciples as “children.”

The term evokes that commandment about honoring father and mother. Here Jesus is taking the role of the father, and he is assuring his disciples that he will protect them. The repositioning of “honor your father and your mother” thus finds another effect: Jesus is now in the role of father to this group of children; they can trust him.

Despite claims about a “camel gate” in Jerusalem, a gate that required people to unpack their camels so that they could pass through, there is no such gate. Despite claims that Jesus really said “thick rope” (Aramaic: *kamilon*) rather than “camel” (Greek: *kamelon*), that doesn’t work either.

First, getting a rope through a needle (think of a sewing needle and a rope used to tie a boat) is already a tough move. The camel, a large animal, is an excellent example since it was a pack animal known for hauling goods. If a camel can be burdened with riches, so can we.

Second, rabbinic literature uses a similar expression in speaking of an elephant rather than a camel (b. Berakhot 55b). In fact, the image of the elephant forced through the eye of a needle is an idiom for making strained legal arguments. In a late verse from the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Metzi’a 38b), one somewhat snarky rabbi asks another: “Perhaps you are from Pumbedita [site of a famous rabbinic academy; one could substitute Harvard or Yale or, well, Vanderbilt], where people pass an elephant through the eye of a needle.”

Third, the formulation “it is easier” presumes a difficulty in both cases: the first case is impossible and the second is even more so. For example, Jesus states, “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped” (Luke 16:17). Finally, we know Jesus’s early followers were discomfited by this whole episode, so that according to the apocryphal Acts of Peter and Andrew, the eye

of a needle expands so much that a camel can walk through. This later text domesticates Jesus by making his statement prosaic rather than provocative, or if you prefer, routine rather than radical.

Money—“mammon” in Aramaic—can become a god. But one can use money for the good. The people at whose homes Jesus eats and heals are not selling all they have; they do not have to and should not, because they are displaying hospitality. Jesus does not tell Martha to sell her home; to the contrary, he receives hospitality there, Martha practices ministry there, and in this house Jesus continues his teaching. The people who welcome the disciples, sent out with no provisions of their own, are not selling all; they are instead welcoming those who have no monetary means of reciprocation.

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

The disciples should not be shocked. Their entire tradition, from Torah to Prophets to Wisdom literature, has taught them that wealth is a problem. Plus, they themselves have already given up their own estates, however large or small, as Peter will go on to state in 10:28. They had already heard Jesus say, “Blessed are you who are poor, / for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). When the disciples are astounded, that may be Mark’s clue to readers to say, “Not again guys,” or “Hey, we can do better.” At best, their reaction serves as a negative foil.

Jesus states, twice in Mark’s Gospel, that all things are possible with God, first here, in relation to the salvation of the rich, and again in 14:36, when in Gethsemane Jesus prays,

“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” Luke 1:37, Mary’s Magnificat, offers the variant, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” All things may be possible, but all things we want to happen do not happen. Prayer is not an automatic system whereby one asks for something, then makes a deal with God—If I get this, I promise to give to charity, love my neighbor, stop feeling envy, clean my room, whatever—and then collects on the promise. If it were, God would not be God, and God is free to be and do what whatever God determines.

God determines who is saved and who is not. We’ll come back to this point when we get to John 14:6b, where Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” but here, in Mark’s Gospel, the issue is whether a person with resources, and especially a rich person, can be saved. While God determines the final verdict, there remain things we can do to help in the decision-making process. The point is not to earn salvation, or earn divine attention, or chalk up (do people still use chalk?) marks on the nice vs. naughty board.

According to Jesus, we are judged by what we do rather than by the status we inherit. God will make the final judgment; our job is to live by what God wants, with the Ten Commandments being a good starting point, along with love of God and love of neighbor. Paul provides a similar answer to the would-be disciple’s question, “what might I do to inherit eternal life?” The Apostle writes, “For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (Romans 2:6-7).

At the end of this section in Mark’s Gospel, we lose sight

of the would-be disciple. But I wonder . . . later we will meet an unnamed disciple with Jesus in Gethsemane. After Mark reports that “all . . . deserted him and fled” (14:50), we learn that “a certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They [the soldiers] caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked” (14:51-52). There are multiple speculations on who this man is and why he is there. I’d like to think he is our questioner, who sold all he had, gave to the poor, and in this last attempt to be with Jesus, divests of everything. We can imagine his fate. In doing so, we might imagine our own. Should our epitaph be “He had everything” or “She had it all”? Might there be better inscriptions?