

“God as . . . Fist Unclencher”

Mark 10:17-31

Sermon by Jan Edmiston – Fairlington Presbyterian Church

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Note: *This story is told three times in the gospels and it's sometimes called The Story of the Rich, Young Ruler.¹ In this version, in the Gospel of Mark, we don't hear that he is young. And we don't hear that he is a ruler. All we know is that he is rich.*

Imagine that you are heading out of town – maybe for a day trip or maybe for a trip that will last several days. You've packed your provisions. You've fueled up the car – or in this case, you've broken in your sandals. And just as you get ready to set out, something happens to delay your plans.

All you wanted to do was get going.

This is what happened to Jesus all the time. He was on the far side of the Jordan River with his disciples.² He had plans to go to Jerusalem and then go to Jericho.³ But before they got going, a stranger ran up to him, knelt down before him, and – rather frantically – wanted some theological advice. Or some spiritual counseling. This happened to Jesus all the time. He was always heading off to pray by himself or to do something with his disciples, and somebody would stop him and ask for help⁴.

In this case, it was a rich man.

Immediately, he flattered Jesus:

- he ran to him (dignified people didn't run)
- he knelt down to him
- he called Jesus “Good Teacher.

And then he asked his burning cosmic question:

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Sounded like a fair question.

But Jesus – as he often did – answered the man's questions with another question: Why do you call me good? Only God is good. (Did this man think that Jesus was God? Or was he willing to flatter him to the point of equating him with God—even if he didn't believe it?)

¹ In Matthew 19:16-30 he is “young.” In Luke 18:18-30 he is a “ruler.”

² Mark 10:1 “He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan.” This meant he was on the east bank of the river in what is now either the nation of Jordan or the Golan Heights.

³ See Mark 10:32, 46

But Jesus was so smart. He was off the charts in terms of what scholars today call “emotional intelligence.” He read that man like a newspaper.

Jesus perceived that this stranger lived his life caring very much what other people thought of him. Jesus perceived that this man followed the rules, and not because it was the right thing to do, but because it would score some God points, look good on his eternity resume.

“*You know the commandments,*” Jesus said. And then Jesus started reviewing what this man clearly, dutifully knew:

You shall not murder

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness.

You shall not defraud.

You shall n. . . Wait a minute. What was that last one?

Take a look one more time at the Ten Commandments in your bulletin that we used for today’s confession.

No murdering? Check.

No adultery? Check.

No stealing? Check.

No bearing false witness (a fancy way of saying “No lying”)? Check.

No defrauding? Hmm. It doesn’t seem to be in there does it?

So, what did Jesus know that we don’t know about this man? Maybe . . . that he was trying to commit theological fraud?

For one thing, he was trying to give the impression that he was a solid citizen, a law-abiding Jew, a good person.

But clearly, life was all about him. His interest was for himself: how can I get eternal life? How can I live forever? He was a big fraud.

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Do you remember the movie “Field of Dreams”? Kevin Costner played Ray Kinsella who heard voices in his Iowa cornfield:

“If you build it, he will come.”

Ray did all kinds of crazy things. Built a baseball field in the middle of his farmland. Traveled the country following mysteries. And finally – finally! – he saw the ghost of “Shoeless Joe Jackson” the infamous White Sox outfielder. And while he didn’t exactly run up to him and kneel at his feet and call him Good Teacher – he did ask Shoeless Joe a telling question:

Ray Kinsella: *I did it all. I listened to the voices. I did what they told me. And not once did I ask what's in it for me.*

Shoeless Joe: *What are you saying, Ray?*

Ray Kinsella: *I'm saying, "What's in it for me?"*

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The rich man was asking, "What's in it for me? What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? For me."

Following the laws of God is not about guaranteeing a seat of glory for ourselves in heaven. It's not about following a check-list of rules for the sake of following rules. It's not about living a life that impresses people.

It's about following Jesus – even if that means letting go of certain things we really love.

It's not even about giving away all our money.

The truth is that we cannot be free if there are certain things we will not release. If we don't let go, we will never be free.

This is a subversive message in a culture that stresses accumulating things. And it's not just about cleaning out our closets and getting rid of old junk, clothes we can't wear anymore. This is about an overhaul in the way we live and think:

*I'm not going to cling to things that the world tells me to go for.
I'm not going to grab hold of something just because the culture says I should.*

Remember the old mugger's line: "Your money or your life"? God wants our money and our life. Our goals and our life. Our time and our life. God wants all of us – our whole selves – to follow the way of Jesus. These are hard words to hear, much less follow.

But God is the great Fist Unclencher. God gives us the power to let go of whatever it is that keeps us from following. If we would just let go. If we would simply trust that we can live without anything but God. (It's just that we don't want to.)

We want what we want. We make life about us.

But in the Great Scheme of life, following Jesus – *letting go* – is what allows us to be our true selves. God is inviting to take a hard look at whatever it is we have clenched onto tightly, afraid to release, and trust that it's okay to let go. It's good to let go.

God is inviting us to be free. God is encouraging us to trust in something bigger. Something eternal.

Life is not about us. It's about something, *some One* who has goodness planned for all the world. And even for each of us.