

PDF version of the lesson notes.

I. Introduction

- The first pericope of the lesson is very well known and comes from Mark 10:17–31. It can also be found in Matthew 19:16–30 and Luke 18:18–30. The first part of the pericope is the story about a man who comes to Jesus and asks how to receive eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, and the man responds that he has faithfully kept the commandments since his youth. Jesus, then further instructs him that he must give all he has to the poor to receive treasure in heaven and the man goes away grieving because he was wealthy.
- Before we jump into the lesson proper I want to think about the verses that immediately precede the story of the rich man. The selected text of today's lesson might lead us to miss how stories and episodes in the gospels are related and connected to each other. I think Mark 10:13–16 and Mark 10:17–31 are related and connected with each other even though they tell about independent or separate events. Read Mark 10:13–16:[1]

(13) And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. (14) But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. (15) Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. (16) And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.

- Certainly, these verses are important in their own right. For example, they emphasize Jesus' love for children. However, I want to keep our focus narrow and on the text of our lesson. *How or in what way does this story affect your understanding of or help you understand the story of the rich man and Jesus' related teachings on riches and eternal life?*
- It really is a delightful contrast and reversal. The children (the most fragile and dependent members of society) represent those who will enter the Kingdom of God. Entrance into the Kingdom is a gift; we are dependent on God for it the same way a child is dependent on her parents. Notice the irony that is revealed. The rich man wants to know how to receive eternal life, but we as the reader have really just had that question answered.

II. Good Teacher and Eternal Life

- Read Mark 10:17–18:

(17) And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? (18) And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God.

- *What do we learn about the man who approaches the Savior? Is the fact that he comes running an important detail? Is it important that he kneeled before the Savior?*
- I think it does suggest that the man is anxious. He really wants to talk to Jesus and in some sense he refuses to be denied that opportunity. I also think it suggests that his question is sincere. Lastly, there might be a hint of aggression (more on this later).
- *Notice the excluded details. Mark doesn't tell us that the man is rich; this fact is revealed later by Jesus in the story. Is this an important detail? Why exclude this detail and not describe the young man as rich?*
- I think Mark really makes the right decision in terms of retelling the story to an audience. We get to discover what the man lacks through the words of the Savior. Jesus is able to zero in on what the man lacks. I think this is such a great way to construct the story because it causes me to insert myself in the man's position and ask what I lack.

A. Who is Good?

- The underlying Greek, translated here as "Good Master" can also be translated, "Good Teacher." (see, for example, the NRSV or the NIV). Also, addressing Jesus as "Good Teacher" is unusual.[2]
- *What do you make of the response of Jesus? Does the response seem a little testy? Does it make sense? Does it leave you a little bit puzzled?*
- I think it is important to keep in mind that we are reading about a very foreign culture. The culture of ancient Palestine is very different than ours. *Is there reason to believe that this is a particular concern for this pericope?* I actually think it is a big concern here. The start of this story involves a greeting and compliment. Just thinking about our own culture, it seems like both those things often require cultural context to understand.
- *Suppose someone compliments you on giving a great talk in Sacrament Meeting, are there culturally acceptable and unacceptable ways to answer that question? Do you think something like that could be going on here?*
- I think it is very possible. Malina and Rohrbaugh (of the Context Group), suggest that the honor–shame dimensions of the cultural of Palestine at this time are very important in terms of understanding situations like this one. For example, they suggest the following is the context for the interchange between the man and Jesus:

[The] man opens his question with a compliment, calling Jesus "Good

Teacher." In a limited-good society, compliments indicate aggression; they implicitly accuse a person of rising above the rest of one's fellows at their expense. Compliments conceal envy ... Jesus must fend off the aggressive accusation by denying any special quality of the sort that might give offense to others. Such a procedure is fully in line with the canons of honor-shame interaction. The honorable person, when challenged, pushes away the challenge and diffuses any accusation that may fuel the position of his opponents.[3]

- *What do you think about this possibility? Does it make sense? Is it consistent with the other details in the pericope?*
- I think it is pretty consistent, and what I like about the preceding explanation is that it changes how I perceive the response of the Savior to the man. The Savior is not giving a stern rebuke. He is diffusing the situation. He is answering in way that ensures that the man and that the crowd or people listening to the discussion are comfortable. He is answering in a way the makes the question the focus rather than the implicit aggression in the compliment. Is the explanation consistent with the other details in the pericope? I think it might be. The running and kneeling before Jesus is consistent with aggression. Those actions, to some degree, aggressively put Jesus on a pedestal. Of course, that seems entirely appropriate to me since Jesus is the Messiah, but I also think it does, at the very least, seem consistent with the cultural explanation advanced by Malina and Rohrbaugh.

B. Eternal Life?

- The man asks Jesus, "what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Is this a strange question in some ways? I mean, is it the kind of question people usually ask Jesus in the gospels? What sort of thing do people in the gospels usually ask Jesus?
- We, as Mormons, have a fairly precise notion about what it means to inherit eternal life. *Do you think this question is likely to reflect the same basic understanding of what it means to inherit eternal life? Could it reflect a vastly different understanding?*
- I kind of doubt that man had the same exact notion of the theological concept of "eternal life" as we do, but there does seem to be a pretty positive correlation. Later in the story things like "treasure in heaven" are mentioned. Also, we have discussion involving entering, "the Kingdom of God." Both of these, I think, suggest a strong overlap.

III. Keep the Commandments and Give All to the Poor

- Read Mark 10:19–22:

(19) Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. (20) And he answered and said unto him, Master, all

these have I observed from my youth. (21) Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. (22) And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.

A. Keep the commandments

- *What do you make of the list of commandments cited by Jesus? Why these commandments? Is it important that the commandments cited are all about how we should treat other people?*
- The first thought that comes to my mind is that these specific commandments aren't the point. They are a representative sample. Jesus is telling the man to keep all the commandments and then proceeds to give a few examples.
- *What do you make of the man's claim that, "all these have I observed from my youth?" Isn't his claim impossible? Do you think he is being sincere or deceitful?*
- We (or at least I) tend to think of the claim as impossible because "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23). Paul, of course, made that statement, but on the other hand Paul also referred to his obedience with respect to the law as, "touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Thus, I am not actually sure what Paul and the man mean, but I think it is pretty clearly they don't mean they have never sinned or broken any commandments. Second, I tend to think the man is sincere because of the indication of Jesus' love for him.
- *What does the man's response tell us about how he understood the process of receiving eternal life?*

B. Give All to the Poor

- *How should we understand Jesus' challenge to the man to give all he has to the poor? Is this challenge unique or confined to this particular case or is it a more general call to all members of the Christian community?*
- *What things would the man be giving up if he followed the challenge of Jesus? Would it just be a loss of possessions?*
- The man probably already gave generously to the poor through almsgiving. Such almsgiving was an important duty of the rich. *How was Jesus' challenge different than normal almsgiving?* Well, the almsgiving that is reference in the gospel is very public. I don't think this is. *Doesn't this challenge imply that he would have to sell his land and the family estate?* If that is correct, then it implies a pretty heavy sacrifice with regard to family. *Why would Jesus ask for such a sacrifice? Do we see similar demands in other parts of the gospels?*

IV. Eye of the Needle

- Read Mark 10:23–27

23 And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! 24 And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. 26 And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved? 27 And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.

- *Is it important that verse 23 indicates that Jesus is now speaking to the disciples? Is this switch between public and private discourse important?*
- This is a typical pattern in the gospel of Mark. For example, the pattern of public to private discourse happens in the first story of the chapter where the pharisees questions Jesus about marriage and divorce. It also happens in our next story, the widow's mite.
- *Why are the disciple astonished by his words? Does it suggest something about their implicit attitude towards the wealthy?*
- Well, it certainly suggests that the disciples believe that wealth is a sign or signal of divine favor. Thus, Jesus statement is, once again, a reversal of common assumptions and beliefs. How do you reconcile these verse with passages in the Book of Mormon that do link prosperity with righteousness (2 Nephi 1:9)? Is the context different in those situations in the Book of Mormon?
- *Notice, how Jesus refers to the disciples as Children. Is this important in light of the larger context of Mark 10? Does it provide a link back to the previous story?*
- I think the statement, "how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God," can engender a lot of discussion because of the use of "trust in riches." However, the "trust in riches" phrase is probably not original to the text. Manuscripts that simply refer to the rich are better attested[5]. Thus a better translation may be,

23 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!" (NRSV)

A. Hyperbole

- Jesus engages in hyperbole to make his point about riches and entrance into the Kingdom of God. Notice, the point here is hyperbole; a camel is the largest animal in Palestine and a needle is the smallest opening. Many people blunt the hyperbole in this verse. For

example, a few manuscripts substitute the Greek word for rope in place of camel (the two words are very similar in Greek). Also, some people have suggested that this refers to a gate that camels had to pass through to enter Jerusalem. However, there is no evidence that a gate like that ever existed.[4] Furthermore, the imagery seems slightly humorous and I think the comic imagery of the mixed metaphor is intentional. Blunting the hyperbole ruins the comic nature of the image.

- *Why would Jesus engage in such dramatic hyperbole? Why would later scribes try to blunt the hyperbole by changing camel to rope?*

B. Rich People

- *What does it all mean? How should we regard these verses in terms of rich people and entrance into the Kingdom of God? How does verse 27 inform or affect your understanding of this pericope?*
 1. *Is the important point here that gaining entry to the Kingdom of God is hard or near impossible for everyone and Jesus is singling out rich people because his audience considered them most favored by God?*
 2. *On the other hand, is the important point that the rich usually have some particularly difficult obstacles to overcome, and that these obstacles make it particularly difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God?*
- *Does verse 27 help us decide which explanation is preferred? Do it suggest another point entirely?*
- Verse 27 may be a reference to Genesis 18:14 where Sarah and Abraham are promised a son in their old age, but Sarah is a bit skeptical and the Lord reminds her that nothing is too hard for the Lord. *Does this potential allusion affect your understanding of verse 27 and other parts of the this pericope?*

V. Widows and Scribes

- The next pericope in the lesson is the story of the widow's mite. However, once again, I think the story of the widow's mite is connected with the story that proceeds it. Therefore, let's read Mark 12:38–44:

(38) And he said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, (39) And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: (40) Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation. (41) And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. (42) And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. (43) And he

called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: (44) For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.

A. Connections

- *First, what are the connections between these two stories? In some ways are the stories contrasting and matched pairs?*
 1. Widows show up and play an important role in both stories. In the first, the behavior of wicked scribes (not necessarily all scribes) towards or with respect to widows leads in part to their condemnation. In the second story, the action of the widow shows that the donations of the rich almsgivers are lacking. In a sense, both times the widows serve to condemn the bad behavior of others.
 2. Second, the behavior, of the scribes in the first and the almsgivers in the second, seems similar. Both seem motivated, at least partly, by appearances.
- *What were these scribes doing? Why was their long clothing and salutations offensive to Jesus? What were they doing to widows?*
- The passage itself suggests that they are flaunting their status or elevating their status by their use of clothing and greetings (as we have seen greetings were way to assert or question social standing). I think this is another on those situations that requires more cultural context to understand. One possibility, is that these scribes are using their knowledge of the law to elevate their status or social standing in society.[6]
- Second, what were these scribes doing to the widows? Scribes were like lawyers and in "antiquity they could serve as trustees of widow's estates. A common way of receiving their fee was to get a share of the estate." [7] Thus, Jesus may be condemning them for the handling of widows' estates. They may have been over-charging which left the widows destitute.

B. The Widows Donation

- *How large was the widow's donation? Scholars estimate that the value of the donation was 1/64 of a denarius, and a denarius was the daily wage of a poorly paid laborer.[8] Thus in today's dollars the donation would be comparable to a dollar or two.*
- *Is it important that the widow is an example of righteousness? Throughout the gospel of Mark, women are often portrayed as the one group the "gets" or understands the message of Jesus. They are often the good or righteous example. Is this an important detail?*
- *Do you think that the widow's mite story is a continuation of the condemnation of the*

scribes from the first story?

- I think it is a definite possibility, but I tend not to think it is the point of the second story. Jesus, does not mention this in his discussion with the disciples in verses 43–44. He focuses on the widow's devotion and sacrifice. However, I think the juxtaposition is intentional. This widow is destitute, and it is possible that the scribes contributed to her status when they handled her estate. The socially powerful have exploited widows so the only thing they can give is all they have. Thus, in some sense I see this as a wonderful tribute to the devotion of the widow and a further condemnation of the scribes mentioned in the first story.

Endnotes

1. This is completely irrelevant to the lesson itself but I thought it was kind of interesting. Apparently, Mark 10:13–16 was used in the early Christian church to justify infant baptism (Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 886–887).
2. Brown, Raymon E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 618.
3. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 191–192.
4. Brown, Raymon E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 618.
5. Coogan, Michael D. (Editor), 2001, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford University Press, 77.
6. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 203–204.
7. Brown, Raymon E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 623.
8. Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 912.