What Money Can't Buy You
Mark 10:17-31

We're starting our summer series today - on the Hard Sayings of Jesus: some of those things Jesus said that challenge the way we see life, or leave you thinking, did he really mean that?

And today we're going to look at the encounter Jesus had with a rich young man and Jesus' comment afterwards that 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.' Which, given that we are living in a country routinely voted one of the best places to live in the world, should send a shiver down all our spines, especially if you drove here in a car, and especially if that car was made in Germany. I'm ok, because mine was made in Spain, but the rest of you are on much dodgier ground.

What Money Can't Buy You

Now, if I were to ask you, would you like to earn more than you do now? Or, would a bit of extra money be helpful? Most of us would say, 'sure'. Or if you received a windfall, how many of us would think, 'wow, that's come at just the right time!'?

You see, we naturally think of money as being like a key that opens doors - to opportunities we want to pursue, or like a passport that gets us places we want to go. Experiences, holidays, education, leisure, even relationships either are or seem more accessible if you have more money. Because just doing life is easier if you have money than if you don't.

Plus, having more gives you a certain status, doesn't it? Sure, there's the crass kind of status, like the rich kids of instagram, but who gets asked to be the chairman of a charity? The guy barely making ends meet, or the successful, philanthropic businessman? Who gets asked to give the speech at commencement? The street cleaner or the Fortune 500 CEO?

Plus, money offers you security. You can pay your health insurance, you can handle economic shocks, you can help other family members if you have wealth. You don't need to fear what tomorrow brings quite so much if your bank balance is healthy.

And in Jesus' day, you could add to all those benefits the fact that riches were a sign of God's approval. That the rich person was blessed by God. It's why the disciples are astounded when they hear what Jesus says, because if the wealthy aren't saved, what hope is there for the rest of us?

And this man has wealth in abundance. Mark tells us in v22, 'He had great possessions.' Matthew tells us he was young. Luke tells us he was a ruler. Combine them and you see why he's known as the rich young ruler. So in many ways he has it all, doesn't he? He has the status, the security, the can-do and the blessedness that comes with wealth.

But as you watch Jesus interact with him, you realise there are some things money cannot buy.

Firstly, it can't buy you inner satisfaction, inner peace. He's got a portfolio of investments. He's got influence and power. He's got those good manners that come with the kind of education money can buy - he's respectful to someone like Jesus who would have been below his social standing.

He has all these things and yet he's still lacking something, and he knows it.

Look how he comes, v17, 'A man ran up and knelt before [Jesus] and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now, running in the heat of the day shows a certain earnestness, doesn't it. He's serious about this. And he's serious because he's asking the right kind of question - how can I be saved? So he's spiritually aware, he's searching. He knows he hasn't got all the answers. And he's coming to the right person.

Don't you think he's the kind of person you'd love to turn up to church? If he turned up here: wealthy, educated, polite, young, asking the right questions, we'd say, 'welcome to Westlake! Can I tell you about our building campaign?'

But however together his life seems, he knows there's something missing, something wealth hasn't been able to give him. There's an inner unrest: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Look at the question. *What must I do?* It's interesting, isn't it, that even in his asking he's assuming it's down to him. That his relationship with God is going to be based on his doing. But that's the way think isn't it? It's certainly the way successful people tend to think: that you achieving your goals is down to you.

But Jesus doesn't immediately answer his question. Instead he picks him up on calling him 'good': Verse 18, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Now Jesus isn't being pedantic, and he's not denying he's good, or God. This young man thinks the basis of salvation, of entering God's kingdom is being and doing good. And so Jesus begins by gently unsettling his assumptions - you think your relationship with God depends on you being good - listen, only God is good, so where does that leave you?

And with that hanging in the air Jesus gives him the basics. Verse 19, "You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.' And those are the Ten Commandments that deal with how you treat others, because you can talk long about your love for God, but Jesus knows that it's in concrete relationships that our hearts really show.

And yet, Jesus does a bit of editorial work on the commandments. He switches 'Do not covet' for 'Do not defraud.' And you've got to wonder, why? Probably because this young man's already got everything. He doesn't have to look at anyone else's stuff and think, 'man I want one of those!' He's already got it. But how did he come by that wealth, because so often wealth is made at the expense of the poor?

And he responds, "All these I have kept from my youth." I've always done what's right by others. And when it comes to money, I'm an ethical investor.' You know, there's a certain self-respect, a self-belief that comes with wealth and the status and security wealth brings, isn't there? And he's got it.

And yet, Jesus doesn't say, 'you little liar!' Mark tells us, v21, 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him.' Have you ever been looked at by someone and it feels like they're looking inside you? Well,

imagine what it felt like to come under the prolonged gaze of Jesus. And yet what comes next is not Jesus setting him up for a fall, it's coming from Jesus' love for him.

Verse 21, "You lack one thing." Today we have a weak view of love. Today, love means you've got to agree with me. Love means you've got to affirm me. But here we see Jesus loving this man, and he will do the exact opposite of affirm him. And this man will not go away feeling great about himself, he will go away sad. And yet, Jesus is doing it out of love for him.

"You lack one thing." One thing, but Jesus proceeds to give him four imperatives, four things to do: 1. go, 2. sell everything, 3. give to the poor and 4. come, follow me. But they combine in the one thing he lacks: God as the most important, the central, the defining thing in his life. God as the one he gets his security and status from.

He may or may not have been doing a good job of keeping those ten commandments Jesus lists, but he has fallen at the first of the ten - to have no other gods but God.

You see, why does Jesus tell him to sell everything? It's not so he can buy his salvation, is it? Or because this is what everyone has to do. Because in Luke's account of this event, this encounter is followed by that of another rich man, Zacchaeus, and he does get saved, and he does go away happy, but he only gives half his possessions to the poor. And we know that Peter, one of the disciples, hasn't sold everything, because he still owns a boat and possibly a house. So this is not a generic command for *all* to sell all and buy your way in.

Jesus says it because it reveals this man's idolatry.

Now, does anyone know what McBurney's Point is? It's one third of the way from the anterior superior iliac spine to the umbilicus, and if you've got acute appendicitis and your doctor puts his finger on it, you know it. And this young man is a genuinely nice guy, he's a genuine seeker, asking the right question to the right person, and he knows he's missing something in life. But Jesus has just put his finger on the McBurney's point of his heart. Jesus has just identified the thing he loves more than God.

And selling everything and giving to the poor and then coming and following Jesus will strip him of the status and security of wealth. Now he will have to find those things in God alone. In his relationship with Christ alone. If he follows through on this, he will have to trust God above his own doing, and value him above everything he has valued to date, and find his own personal value in him.

You see, when you're a good, and successful, person like this man, like most if not all of you, there's a danger that you see your relationship with God as an addition to all your other commitments. Whereas Jesus is saying that your relationship with him must become the thing that rules all other obligations.

And Jesus is asking him: Can you live like that? If you want to be saved I must conquer all your other loves. Will you let me?

And his response? Verse 22: 'Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.' I think we can take that as a no. Jesus has offered him exactly what he knows he's

missing. Jesus has offered him salvation, entry into the kingdom, the inner certainty and peace of eternal life. But he turns away sad because he values wealth above God. Because he's possessed by his possessions. Owned by the stuff he owns.

How do you know if the same is true for you? If money's got a grip on you like it had on him? Well, if you hear that this command to give everything away is not a generic command for everyone, which it isn't, and you breath a sigh of relief and think, phew, it doesn't apply to me! Then, money probably has a grip on you. Or if you look at what other people get paid, and it grates on you, and you think you should be earning more, like them, then it probably has a grip on you. If you struggle to give away your money in ways that leave you less able to do what you really want to do, or have the lifestyle you want, or if you do give sacrificially but you kind of resent it, then it probably has a grip on you. And if it bothers you that people drive German cars, it definitely has a grip on you!

But what this young men tells us is that money can't buy you that inner satisfaction, that inner peace we're seeking for. Have wealth as your God, stay in its grip, and like him - at least if you're as honest as him, you'll always have this feeling that something is missing.

And that's because what Jesus says next tells you the second thing money cannot buy. And it's the thing under our inner unrest.

Verse 23, 'Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And in face of the disciples amazement - because if the rich - the people seemingly blessed by God, the people we wish we were, can't get in, then what hope for the rest of us? - Jesus repeats it: "How difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!" And then he says today's hard saying, v25, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." And now the disciples aren't just amazed, they go up four levels on the shock-o-meter: v26, 'they were exceedingly astonished.' Because getting a camel through the eye of the needle isn't just difficult it's impossible.

And let's just be clear,'the eye of the needle' wasn't a small gate in Jerusalem that a camel could get through if it went on its knees - would that it were. And Jesus didn't mean a cable instead of a camel. Jesus' point is that it's not just hard, it's impossible. The camel was the biggest animal in their day-to-day lives, and the eye of a needle the smallest opening. And if one of your kids has a toy camel, you couldn't even get that through a needle, let alone the real, smelly, spitting, variety.

You see, money and wealth tell you they open doors for you, and Jesus says, sure, but they also shut the most important door of all. Money tells you, you can do it, you've got the resources, this is a passport that'll get you in anywhere. And Jesus says, that passport is not recognised in the kingdom. A rich person trusting in themselves, in their can-do ability, will never enter the kingdom.

Money says, you can be someone, and Jesus says, the last will be first. Money says, you can have a reputation for being good, for being a giver, for funding the kingdom, and Jesus says, leave your reputation at the door, it means nothing in the kingdom.

You see, riches are seductive. They seem to offer you everything, but they block you from the one thing you lack, the one thing you most need. They cannot buy you salvation.

And this young man is loved by Jesus, but he walks away, because he can't accept his need of grace. He can't accept having to depend on God and not his stuff for his security, his status, his inner satisfaction, and ultimately, his salvation.

But it's not just money, is it? And it might not be money for you. You see, look how Jesus responds to Peter's statement that he and the other disciples *have* left everything for Jesus: v29: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time… with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

You see for some of us it might not be the status or the security of wealth, it could be the comfort of home, it could be family, or friendships or loving relationships. In his commentary James Edwards describes this list Jesus gives as 'our most essential natural network of relationships and allegiances.' Because Jesus always asks us for that thing that we love more than God, that thing our security rests on, that thing that if it was taken away your life would fall apart. Because in the kingdom of God there can be no divided allegiances.

And when that sinks in you begin to understand the astonishment of the disciples, because which of us can do it?

The God of the Impossible
"Then who can be saved?" the disciples ask. Did you notice how Jesus responded? Or rather, how he didn't respond. Because he doesn't say, 'well, you see what money can't buy, you see the snare of money, so make sure you tithe and give lots away.' He doesn't say, 'well, it's ok, just vote left of centre and live on a kibbutz'. He doesn't say, 'it's ok, you're earning less than ten francs a day, God's good with that.'

He says, v27, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." In other words, no one has the power inside themselves to do this. No one can save themselves, no one can change their own heart. But God can. God can break the spell of money, or relationships, or friendships, or academic reputation. God can turn your heart from whatever it is that you think you need more than God.

It's what the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel said would happen isn't it? That God would do something new and give his people a heart transplant. A heart that loves what he loves; a heart that orders our other loves aright.

It's impossible without God, but God is the God of the impossible.

The question is, how does he do it?

The One Who Gave up Riches
When Mark tells us v21, 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him' it's a moment full of pathos. And that's not just because Jesus sees into his heart and puts his finger on his misplaced love. It's not just because Jesus knows this young man is going to make the worst investment decision of his life. It's because this young man is not the only rich young ruler there.

How old do you think he was? 25? 30? He's probably about the same age as Jesus. But whereas this young man can't bring himself to give everything away, Jesus has already given up far greater riches and status and security than this young man, or you and I, could ever imagine. And whatever influence or political power this man has, it's nothing to that of the Son of God. But he gave that up. And very shortly, as he goes to the cross, he will give up even more. He will be stripped naked, his clothes taken from him. His friends will desert him. And even God, his heavenly Father, the closest of close relationships, will turn his face from him. And he will give up his life - the ultimate rich young ruler.

Give up wealth? Give up comfort? Give up relationships? Give up everything and follow Christ? Jesus asks nothing of us that he has not done for us in far greater degree. But when you see him doing it for you, it redirects your loves. It changes your heart, and keeps on changing it. And it opens wide the door of the kingdom to you.

And the disciples response here tells you, it *is* possible to leave behind that which competes with Jesus - but only as you look to him and follow him. And Jesus says as you do, you cannot out-give God. What he gives in return more than compensates.

As AW Tozer said, no one has ever given up anything for Christ that comes anywhere near what he gave up for us.