

# A REALLY TERRIBLE GOD

Mark 10:17-22

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

October 13, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 17 through 22. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 17, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>17</sup> And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>18</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.' " <sup>20</sup> And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." <sup>21</sup> And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

*Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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Today I'm going to criticize your god. Your god boasts great things, but it is weak. Your god boasts that it can make you happy, but those who devote themselves to it are miserable. Your god boasts that it can fulfill your hearts desires, and maybe it can make you feel better for a time, but it never lasts. Your god boasts that it can protect you and keep you healthy, but all who trust in it still get hurt or sick. Your god boasts that it can get you what you want. But then we die, and we learn that this god could not really save us. It was all a fiction. In the end, this god is a huge disappointment. And this god, of course, is money.

Now I hope and pray for you that money is not your only god, but that you trust Jesus to save you from sin, death, the devil, and every false god. Jesus, along with his Father and the Holy Spirit, is your ultimate God, with a capital "G." But we have many other gods. A god, with a small "g," is whatever you fear, love, or trust in above other things. And there is a nearly infinite number of other things we might fear, love, or trust in.

The big one is money. And I suppose that's because money presents itself as the means of getting whatever else we want. It may not be that we want to swim in a pile of gold coins like Scrooge McDuck. But we want all the stuff that money can get for us. Your real god might be a beautiful house or some other possession. Money is just the means of attaining it. And it's not just stuff. Sure, there might be some object that is the desire of your eyes. And you feel that if you get it, your heart will be satisfied. But the temptation is more than just stuff. It might be the power to get your way. Money might be your means of leveraging other people to do what you want. Maybe your real god is success. And money is your means of becoming better than everyone around you. We might think that money will gain us popularity. Perhaps we can use it

to make ourselves more attractive or win friends to ourselves. We may think that money can provide us with security. Your real god might be comfort, and money is just a means to that end. We might think that if we have enough of it, we can live comfortably for the rest of our days. And maybe if something comes up that we really don't want to do, we can just pay someone else to do it for us. Money is such a common god because it is so versatile, or, at least, it seems to be. It presents itself as the answer to everything.

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So let's be honest; for all of us, money is a god. We fear, love, and trust in it. So this is a First Commandment issue. The LORD says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7). In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther asks, "What does this mean?" Answer: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." For all of his voluminous writings, Luther also had the ability to be extraordinarily efficient. Whatever we fear, love, or trust in reveals what our practical god is.

To fear something means that we ascribe power to it, either to save us or destroy us. So it's not like we fear money the same way we might freak out when we see a spider or a snake. But we fear what will happen to us if we don't have any. And you see how this might replace the fear of the true God, who commands and invites us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11; Luke 11:9). We don't see it, and we don't naturally think this way, but our heavenly Father gives us far more earthly security than all the dollars in the world. Money isn't even real. It's just a piece of paper. Or, more likely, it's just a number on a screen. You may wake up some morning to find that number to be meaningless. But you will never wake up to find that your God is dead. So when your financial disaster comes, pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Then watch to see how your Father in heaven answers. Then pray it again the next day, and the next day. Better yet, don't wait for that disaster to come. Stop fearing money. Fear God.

We also love money. And loving money doesn't mean that we hug it or have warm affections toward it. Love has more to do with our actions than our feelings. It means that we serve it. To love God means that we serve him by obeying his commandments. To love your wife, or your husband, or your children means that you sacrifice your interests in order to serve them. And to love money means that you sacrifice yourself in order to obtain it. By our actions we pledge our allegiance to it. But does money really deserve your allegiance? Of all the virtuous things in God's creation, is money really the thing you want to pledge your allegiance to? It's just a piece of paper or a number on the screen. Love God, and love your neighbor.

We also trust in money. This is kind of just the flip side of fear. Just as we fear destruction from not having enough, we trust money to save us from that destruction. And we trust that it will satisfy our hearts desires. And it's not just money, but all the possessions we seek to obtain. It's the desire of the eyes. We see something, and we think it will satisfy us, but it never does. It might make us happy for a short while, but we remain unsatisfied, and our eyes see the next thing. A young boy might see and desire a toy archery set. He begs for it and eventually obtains it. And it's very exciting, but archery is harder than he thought, and the instrument doesn't work as perfectly he hoped. So it's fun, but it doesn't quite scratch the itch. Then he sees a Nerf gun, and he finds enough money to buy it. Will this toy be different? Will it finally satisfy? Probably not. And the more you scratch, the more you itch. Then he grows up and has a son of his own, and his son asks him how many nerf guns he had when he was a kid, and the boy who is now a dad doesn't even remember. Apparently, it was fun, but it did not change his life. Is it okay to enjoy these toys? Of course, but there is a danger in obsessing over them. And there is a profound eternal danger in trusting money or stuff to save or satisfy.

There is a wise man in the Bible that few people are very familiar with. His name was Agur. And I don't know anything about him other than that he wrote the thirtieth chapter of Proverbs. Most of Proverbs was written by King Solomon, the son of King David. But Solomon, or whoever else compiled the book, saw fit to include the wisdom of Agur. And it's really quite wonderful. He wrote this prayer, and I dare you to use it:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that is needful for me,  
lest I be full and deny you  
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’  
or lest I be poor and steal  
and profane the name of my God” (Prov. 30:8-9).

Who would ever pray such a thing? *God, give me only what I need, and whatever you do, don't make me rich.* The world would laugh at such a thing. But Agur had more wisdom than all the supposed wise men of the world. If he actually succeeded in living this way, and we don't know if he did or not, he would have lived with perfect contentment, and then was received into the eternal grace of our Father. That's a much better outcome than all the riches of the world.

Agur also shows us that it's not just the rich who make a god out of money. I think the rich still have more difficulty with this, but the poor can also idolize money. We see this war of financial classes. And it's nothing new; it's been a long war. There are millionaires and billionaires. They want to protect and grow their fortunes. Is money a god to them? Probably. But then there are others, and they might be poor or middle class, and they want to disrupt the whole thing. *Why should the 1% have all the money? I want my piece of their fortune.* Is money a god to them? Yes, obviously. Both sides worship the same god, but they don't even realize they have the same religion. To one side, their money is their god. To the other side, other people's money is their god. It's the same god. So which side is right? Neither. They all need to find a better god, hopefully the true God.

Are you rich? Great. Do something good with it while you still can. Do you have what you need? Great. Don't demand more. Do you have less than what you need? Pray, **“Give us this day our daily bread,”** and ask your church for help. Then live contently, knowing that your Father will provide your daily bread. Then he will receive you into his eternal grace, where you will have treasure in heaven.

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Consider the way Jesus deals with this rich man. The key to understanding this interaction is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” It is not as though selling his possessions is a good work that will earn eternal life for this man. But his possessions were his god, and Jesus exposes that.

I recently saw an example where a man weaponized this passage against Christians, saying, “If you're really a Christian, you need to sell everything and give it away. Otherwise, you're just a hypocrite.” Those who interpret the passage that way are not paying very close attention to it, and they know nothing of the real Christ.

Now, we should not discount that application of this passage. It very well may be that you should sell all that you have and give it away. If your possessions are such a god to you that they draw you away from the true God, you would probably be better off getting rid of it all. On your deathbed, you will say, “That was a good decision.” And after your deathbed, you will know it was.

But that is not the application for everyone. Jesus did not command this of every disciple. He prescribed it for this man, because it threatened his eternal salvation.

We don't know who this man was, and we don't know what became of him. Some people suggest that the man in this passage is Mark, the author of this gospel. Sometimes, gospel writers include themselves in their books without naming themselves. I kind of hope it was Mark, because then we would know what became of him. It may also be that Mark mentions himself again in chapter 14 (v. 51-52), when he writes of a young man who tried to follow Jesus after he was arrested, but ran away naked when the soldiers grabbed him by his clothes. It kind of fits with what we know about the character of Mark. Mark, it seems, was kind of flaky in his commitment, at least earlier in his life. In the book of Acts, we learn that Mark had been a travelling companion of Paul on a missionary journey (12:25), but Mark flaked out and abandoned the work. I could see that fitting with the man we read about here, and it would make this passage more comfortable, because we would at least know that he came to trust in Jesus. But regardless of whether we know what happened to this man, Jesus knew, and Jesus knew what he was doing when he prescribed that he should sell all of his possessions and give his money away.

The man asks about eternal life. "What must I do to inherit eternal life" (10:17). And that should set the stage for how we interpret this passage. It's not about social justice. It's about eternal salvation.

And Jesus recites for him the Ten Commandments, but not all of them. If you look at it, you will see that he recites the Fourth through Tenth Commandments, just not in the normal order. He summarizes the coveting commandments as "Do not defraud," and he moves the Fourth Commandment to the end. So he says, "Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother" (10:18-19). This is what we call the "second table of the law." It's those commandments that can be summarized with, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27).

So what's missing from Jesus' answer? Obviously the first table of the Law. The first three commandments have to do with loving God, and are summarized by, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). And the chief of these commandments is, "You shall have no other gods before Me." But Jesus is not really omitting the First Commandment. He's getting at it in a more personal way.

So after Jesus recites the second table of the Law, the man says, "All these I have kept from my youth." But Jesus knew this man. And Jesus loved him. Mark includes that special detail. He writes, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'" (10:21). So Jesus did not say this to condemn the man, but because he loved him, and he wanted to tear down his false god.

And I have to think that Jesus chose his words carefully when he said, "You lack one thing." Think about that. This man thinks he has kept all of the commandments Jesus recited. He probably hasn't, but Jesus doesn't concern himself with all those. He gets to the heart of the matter. What was he lacking? What commandment had he not kept? The First. His possessions were his god. *Never mind that you haven't murdered anyone or stolen anything, your heart does not trust in the true god. Let's deal with you breaking the First Commandment.*

## A REALLY TERRIBLE GOD (Mark 10:17-22)

The word “lack” is also interesting because of the connection with the man’s possessions. He thought he had an abundance, when it was really his deficit. His wealth was really his lack. *What do you lack? Your possessions. You lack your possessions, not in the sense that you don’t have them, but in the sense that you do have them, and they have stolen your heart.* They had become a god to him, so they were a negative to his account in terms of true wealth. When money becomes a god to you, you can look at your balance or your net worth and put a minus sign in front of it. Because if that is your god, it does not belong to you, but you belong to it. Whatever that number is, it’s a negative, because all it represents is the size of the god that will fail you.

It’s a matter of being rightly ordered under the one true God, our Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Put yourself under his protection. And then, maybe, you can put your possessions under you and use them for his service. If not, unload it. But be careful not to give it to anyone who will make a god out of it.

This is obviously very difficult to accept. “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (10:22). And this is where we really don’t know what became of the man. Why was he sorrowful? Was he sorrowful that he couldn’t keep his possessions? Or was he sorrowful that he couldn’t follow Jesus? Jesus told him to go and sell it all? So did he go back to his possessions to sell all of them? Or did he go back to submit himself to their vain lordship? It’s an open question. And the gospels do this to us sometimes. Mark doesn’t tell us how it ends, because it’s not just the story of this man. It’s the story of all of us.

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It’s all about the First Commandment. Who was his god? Which god will you have?

Jesus commanded the man to follow him. This wasn’t really a command, where if the man kept it he would earn eternal life, but an invitation. To follow Jesus, for us, means that we learn from him. We read the Scriptures to find out who he is and what he did. For this man, “**Follow me,**” was literally an invitation to walk with Jesus, learn from him, and see where he was going. And what would he have heard? What would he have seen?

At this point in Jesus’ ministry, he was on a journey to Jerusalem, where he knew he would be killed. Twice already in the gospel of Mark, Jesus had predicted his crucifixion and resurrection (8:31; 9:30-31). Shortly after this encounter, he would say it again (10:32-34). At this point in his ministry, Jesus had a one track mind. He was fixated on the cross. So it was an invitation for the man to come and witness it all. Very shortly after this encounter, he arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Later that week, on Good Friday, Jesus was crucified. It seems that Jesus’ conversation with this man was only about week before his death. What would he have seen if had followed Jesus? Maybe he did. If so, what did he see? His God, his true God, purchasing his soul, not with something cheap, like silver or gold, but with something truly valuable: “His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, “The Second Article”).

This is your God, who gave all he had, including the tunic off his back, down to his own blood, to redeem you. Your false gods boast great things, but they cannot save you. Only this God, Jesus, can save you, because he actually passed through death. He has destroyed the power of sin and death. He will raise your bodies from the dead. He reigns supreme over all of heaven and earth, which means that he is truly the one who provides for all of your needs. He will provide for you in this life, and in heaven forever. Fear, love, and trust in Jesus. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.