

A COMMENTARY ON THE STORY OF
THE RICH MAN IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

by Emilio G. Chavez

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for Bishop Demetrios Trakatellis

The Gospel of Mark

Harvard Divinity School

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This paper will provide a commentary on the pericope(s) concerning the "rich man" and wealth in Mark 10:17-27, and offer some theological and ethical reflections on the same themes. To begin the first, exegetical section, let me begin with my translation of our passage, reversing the order usually given for vv. 24 and 25 (1):

17. And (as) he (was) setting out on the journey(,) one running to and kneeling to him asked him, Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?
18. But Jesus said to him, Why (do you) call me good? No one (is) good except one(,)God.
19. You know the commandments: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and your mother.
20. But he said to him, Teacher, all these I observed from my youth.
21. And Jesus fixing his gaze upon him loved him and said to him, You lack one thing: go, sell everything you have and give (it to the) poor, and come! follow me.
22. But he being gloomy (or shocked (2)) at the statement went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions.
23. And looking around Jesus says to his disciples; How difficult the ones having wealth shall enter into the kingdom of God!
25. Easier it is (for) a camel to go through (the) eye of a needle than (for) a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.
24. And the disciples were astounded at his words. But Jesus again answering says to them, Children, how difficult it is to enter into the kingdom of God;
26. But they were exceedingly amazed saying to themselves, And who can be saved?
27. Looking at them Jesus says, For man (it is) impossible but not for God, for all things (are) possible for God.

EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY

We are here dealing with two basic pericopes, one being the story of Jesus' encounter with a potential disciple who refuses his call and the other being a conversation between Jesus and his disciples on wealth. The two pericopes are closely linked in the tradition, so as almost to be one whole, and Taylor thinks its origin is ultimately an eyewitness (3). The passage serves a catechetical purpose; to an original story (vv.17-22) is added the conversation (vv.23-27), which is a Markan redaction, combining several logia which preceded it (4). Furthermore, vv. 24b-27 constitute an appendix 'fundamentally changed by Mark' (5). It serves to enlarge a pre-Markan saying regarding riches (6); 'the final editing includes phrases which draw back from the severity towards possessions which characterized the earlier tradition' (7). Schweizer believes that vv. 23b, 25 and 27b are Jesus' original words concerning riches (he considers the story itself to be about discipleship) (8).

v. 17. The story is set in Jesus' way to Jerusalem (ὁδός), a catechetical and discipleship theme (9). Ἐκπορεύεσθαι is a favorite Markan word ('When Jesus calls he is usually in motion') (10). Εἷς ("one") without the substantive is unique here (11); the anonymity recalls the nameless rich man of Luke who feasted with Lazarus at his door. Only at the end are we told he is rich (12). The 'kneeling' is unusual for a Greek or a Jew to do (13); it 'only' means to fall at someone's knees (14), and was a sign of reverence before an important person (cf. 1 Kgs 1:15) (15). The ques-

The statement needs modification in view of what you say next

tion he asks concerns the ultimate and absolute: what might he do (is this a question on the essence of Torah? [16]) to enter into 'life in the coming age', ζωὴ αἰώνιος (the LXX rendering of חַיֵּי עוֹלָם, cf. Dn 12:2), which man 'inherits' as a gift from God (17). Here, as in John, eternal life is equivalent to kingdom of God (18), and means not a present possession (cf. Jn 3:15) but life after death in relation to the resurrection of the dead (cf. 2 Mc 7:9). Cf. also Mk 9:43-45. On κληρονόμος, cf. LXX Lev 20:24.

v. 18. The epithet 'good' is very rare in Jewish literature (used once in sense of 'kind master') but is common in Greek (19). There is an apparent touch of flattery here, which Jesus shrinks from as 'shocking his religious sense' (20). Therefore Jesus' admonition (the adjective will not be repeated).

No! It is the expression "διδάσκει" "teaches" which is rare

v. 19. Continuing in a matter-of-fact manner, Jesus recounts the commandments which relate to dealings with one's neighbor (21). We do not have to wait until the end of the story to surmise that Jesus already has an intuitive appraisal of the man's situation: he has come seeking a definitive answer to his religious quest, but he may not realize that the kingdom of God is not a matter of euphonic supplications, but of putting all aside in true obedience to God, which means taking up the cross and following Jesus. Jesus' words here are a challenge (22); his preaching is never reduced to the traditional understanding of the Jews, and in this instance far surpasses Judaism's teaching on wealth (23). Bornkamm thinks the reply was meant to be exhaustive (24, and see Légasse 25). Whether it was or not. (I

do not believe it was), it certainly was part of the answer to the question (26).

The list of commandments is interesting. K. Thomas (27) believes that 'honor your father and your mother' was added at "Stage I", and that 'do not defraud' was added at "Stage IIa". It is a later addition omitted in certain manuscripts (28), but this may be due to the fact that it is not one of the original Ten Commandments. But it was a commandment well-known in the Jewish ethical tradition which 'even pressed itself into the LXX in Dt 24:14' (29). It was added because of its appropriateness for a man of wealth (30); 'it is the special temptation of the rich' (31). Μη ἀποστερήσῃς means 'do not deprive or defraud' (32; cf. 1Co 6:7f). In biblical Greek it refers to the keeping back^{of} the wages of a hireling (33; cf. Mal 3:5, Jm 5:4). "The context of the prohibition in both Dt and Mk is related to conduct toward the poor" (34). See Légasse for a list of applications of this term, which is related to exploitation (35).

vv. 21f. The man replies that he has done all this since his youth (was he mature, then? 36). Jesus' look is described by Gode: "ce regard d'amour était en même temps un regard plein de pénétration par lequel Jésus discerna les bonnes et les mauvaises qualités de ce coeur, et qui lui inspira la parole suivante" (37). This recollection of Jesus' emotions is very typical of Mark (38) Jesus seeks the man by fixing his gaze; the man should 'prove the intrinsic worth of obedience by abandoning his possessions as a consequence of discipleship in total commitment' (39); he lacks one thing (not an act): to follow Jesus (40). In this man's case,

} This is footnote material

this means giving up 'all that was holding him back (keeping him bound to a "conventional goodness") from giving himself completely to the kingdom of God' (41).

l'appelé est un riche et il a "de grands biens". Ce que Jésus estime superflu de préciser lorsqu'il s'agit de pêcheurs du lac de Tibériade, il le juge indispensable à la réalité même d'une consécration à sa personne et au Royaume de Dieu, si celui qu'il convie est un possédant de ce monde. En aliénant ses biens et en les distribuant aux pauvres, le riche réalise la rupture effective sans laquelle il ne peut s'offrir tout entier ... (42)

Δεῦρο ('hither!') is an adverb used as an imperative (43; cf. 1:17f, 20, 2:14). 'Treasure in heaven' is not a superior degree of recompense, but the eschatological retribution, the eternal life which he seeks (44). "God's offer, which would grant him everything he is seeking, makes his refusal especially conspicuous" (45).

v. 22. "As he heard the sentence, his brow clouded over, the lighthearted optimism of his mood broke down" (46) Στουβάσω, an unusual word (47), refers to the "sombre, gloomy man who broods over unwelcome thoughts" (48; cf. Ez 27:35, LXX). Wycliffe: "he was ful sorie in the word;" ("the price was too great to pay even for eternal life.") (49). "Ce départ est le signe d'un refus, lequel s'accomplit dans la tristesse." (50)

Κτήματα refers to possessions and properties of all kinds (51; cf. Acts 5:1, 2:45). This is the only story where the call to follow Jesus is refused; "Mark makes no comment" Says P. Lagrange : "l'évangéliste ne le blâme pas; qui ne le plaindrait?" (52). 'This cohesive episode transmits a memory not modified in

its essential elements'.(53)

v. 23. There is a certain exasperation in Jesus' words, which lead to v. 24. V.23b is a key logion of Jesus regarding wealth (54). Note that the rich man had asked about eternal life as eschatological retribution, and Jesus here equates it with the kingdom of God (55; cf. Mk 4:19, 6:8, 8:36). Χρήματα, rare in the Synoptics, is more general than κτήματα (Taylor, 56). Δυσκόλως, significantly, occurs in the New Testament only in this context (57), as does δύσκολος in v. 24.

v. 25. Following codex Bezae and other manuscripts, this verse should immediately follow v. 23 (58). There is no sign of Mark here; it is a vivid, genuine saying of Jesus (59). The camel here 'is taken to be the largest animal on Palestinian soil'.

"Jesus is using a typical oriental image to emphasize the impossibility of something by way of violent contrast." "Entry into the kingdom of God is completely impossible for the rich." (60).

"We thus have a similar rule to that of ἀδύνατον of Hb 6:4." Κάμιλον cannot be substituted for κάμηλον, nor can διὰ τρήματος ραφίδος (Mt) be taken figuratively; 'there is no reference to a hawser or to a narrow gate in the city walls' (61).

See Taylor (62); Lagrange points out that τρομαλία is koine while τρήμα is classical; ραφίς is vulgar, βελόνη is classical (Lk).(63).

v. 24. The disciples' astonishment is typically Markan (64). Perhaps it is due to Jesus' contradicting the traditional Jewish view of riches as a blessing (65), but more likely the disciples are astounded at the hard saying of Jesus. Thus a softer logion

Footnote
see below

is created out of it (66). The pre-Markan saying about the danger of riches is now put in an over-all salvation perspective (67).

Τέκνα occurs only here in reference to the Twelve. "The Lord, in sympathy with their growing perplexity, adopts a tone of unusual tenderness." (68) Mark has generalized discipleship from abandonment of wealth to discipleship in and of itself, but the pericope illustrates why some do not heed the call of the Gospel (69; cf. Mk 4:14-20).

v. 26. More Markan astonishment (70), this time increased, in mounting tension toward the climax. Σώζειν is part of the vocabulary of the early church (71).

v. 27. The Markan ἐκβλέψας indicates the stress Jesus lays on the saying (72); the logion is a theological maxim (73; cf. LXX Zech 8:6, Job 42:2, Gen 18:14; Mk 9:23). The final emphasis is on the power of God (74), in whose hands we are.

THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL COMMENTARY

The story of the rich man who refuses Jesus' call is an important one, found in all three Synoptics, and could well have its origin in an historical episode in the life of Jesus (75). This would not be surprising, when we examine what this story is about: it is about a concrete instance of refusal of the call of Jesus, set in the most detailed and propitious circumstances. A man eagerly runs up to Jesus, almost overdoes himself in signs of respect and reverence, and earnestly inquires as to the way to salvation. Jesus responds somewhat cautiously, perhaps taken a-back by the man's impulsiveness. He recites the social Torah, al-

ready zeroing-in on what is missing in this man's life. The evangelist does not prejudice his reader by mentioning that the man is rich yet, but this fact must have been obvious to the parties involved. The man states that he has followed the Torah, but Jesus knows that not enough has been done to enter the kingdom. More than "conventional goodness" (76) is necessary. Jesus states what this "more" translates into: give what you have to the poor and become my follower, and what you are seeking you shall have. But the man cannot give up his riches, thus giving rise to what has been called 'the saddest story in the New Testament' (77).

How was this story viewed in the early church? How must we view it today? We must not dissociate the two sides of the coin wealth/poverty. Wealth in itself would not seem to have such a noxious character as to exclude from the kingdom of God, which is the meaning of Jesus' saying about the camel and the eye of the needle. But having wealth becomes utterly noxious for salvation when it exists alongside of starvation, and nothing is done to alleviate it.

That is why John Chrysostom (78) could say that 'not to give to the poor out of one's goods is robbery and an attempt on their life,' and Basil that 'how can we not consider the person who bypasses the hungry body as being among the most ferocious of the wild beasts, deserving of all punishment and accountable as a homicide?' (79). Basil and Ambrose and the other Fathers speak about the biblical understanding that what God requires is not fasting or religious observances primarily, but to share our bread with the poor (80). Cf. the 'last judgment' in Mt 25 (81). *Footnote unclear*

We find a similar concern in the most primitive church. In 2 Co 8:2f,14, 9:6ff, Paul expresses great concern for "extreme poverty" and liberal sharing, 'so that abundance may supply want as a matter of equality' (8:14), and 'cheerfully' (9:7). The Jerusalem church especially asked him that he remember the poor, 'which very thing I was eager to do' (Gal 2:10). In 1 Jn 2, the author talks about the new (or old) commandment: to love one's brethren, not 'the things in the world' (v. 15). In 1 Jn 3, love is contrasted to hate, which is murder, and which means 'having the world's goods and seeing one's brother in need and yet closing one's heart to him' (vv. 11-18). Well known are the sayings in James: God has chosen the poor, whom the community dishonors, whom the rich oppress (82); 'whoever fails in one point of the law has violated it all' (2:10); faith without clothing or feeding the poor is dead (2:14ff.).

We therefore see that looking at the rich man's predicament in an isolated spirituality of detachment or of 'spiritual poverty' is to miss the whole seamy side of wealth. Even Plato saw the connection between wealth and iniquity (83), and concluded that to be truly happy one must be truly good, but to be truly good and very wealthy is impossible. See Final Note. To make

So perhaps the background of our pericopes is vividly illustrated in the Gospel of the Nazareans, full of Palestinian flavor: There are two rich men, and after the second has asked Jesus the same question as our rich man and has gotten the same answer and invitation, he

began to scratch his head and the thing did not please him. And the Lord said to him: 'How sayest thou: I have kept the law and the prophets? For it is written in the law: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, and lo, many of thy brethren, sons of Abraham, are clad in filth, dying for hunger, and thine house is full of many goods things, and nought at all goeth out of it unto them'. (84)

It is then that Jesus turns to Simon Peter and gives his saying about the camel and the eye of the needle.

The saying is severe, but it is in keeping with Jesus' strong emotions, especially in the face of misery (cf. Mk 1:41, and the possible reading "moved with anger" at leprosy) and hard-heartedness (3:5). There was no regular provision made for the poor in Palestine (85); Jesus' invitation to the rich seeker is perfectly in keeping with the demands of the kingdom: how is it possible to love God if one loves Mammon, if one is not doing everything possible to alleviate the misery of one's neighbors? (86). Thus Gregory Nazianzen says:

Do you think that humaneness toward your neighbor is not a requirement, but optional; not law, but counsel? I myself would much desire it and thus think of it; but I am frightened by the left hand with its goats and the imprecations made by the Judge; and this not because they had robbed or committed sacrileges or adulteries, nor some other prohibited thing; nothing of that brought their condemnation, but rather not having cared for Christ himself in the person of the poor. (87)

If it was riches that were behind the only recorded refusal of Jesus' call in the Gospels, let us not overlook the other reality associated with acquiring and keeping wealth: destitution.

FOOTNOTES. References are to authors in the bibliography.

- (1) On the reversal, cf. Lagrange, p. 252, and Taylor, p. 431f. Extensive use was made of Bauer's lexicon, along with Marshall's interlinear Greek translation of the N.T. Also consulted for grammar was Paine; Aland for the critical text.
- (2) Cf. Bauer, p. 779.
- (3) Cf. Taylor, p. 430.
- (4) Cf. García, pp. 31f.; Schweizer, p. 210.
- (5) Cf. García, p. 32.
- (6) Cf. Coulot, p. 252.
- (7) Meadland, p. 22.
- (8) Cf. Schweizer, p. 210.
- (9) Cf. García, p. 30; Best, p. 110.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Cf. Lagrange, p. 247.
- (12) Cf. Taylor, p. 425.
- (13) Cf. Schweizer, p. 210.
- (14) Lagrange, p. 248; "signifie seulement tomber aux genoux de quelqu'un".
- (15) Cf. Riga, p. 1124.
- (16) Cf. Légasse, p. 32.
- (17) Cf. Taylor, p. 426.
- (18) Cf. Taylor, p. 425.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) Rawlingson, p. 139.
- (21) Cf. García, p. 31.
- (22) Cf. Taylor, p. 428.
- (23) Cf. Taylor, p. 430; the rabbis also encouraged almsgiving, for merit, p. 429; 'Jesus' standpoint is nearer to that of the Rechabites and the Essenes, with important differences'.
- (24) Bornkamm, p. 148: and only when the young man (Mt) is dissatisfied does Jesus give him a second reply.
- (25) Légasse, p. 35; the Torah normally suffices (cf. Mk 12:29ff.); but this man feels a need for more. (cf. Branscomb, p. 182).
- (26) Cf. Taylor, p. 428.
- (27) Cf. Thomas, p. 207.
- (28) Cf. Branscomb, p. 182.
- (29) Stendahl, p. 62.
- (30) Cf. Branscomb, p. 182.
- (31) Rawlingson, p. 139.
- (32) Cf. Taylor, p. 428.
- (33) Cf. Field, p. 33.
- (34) Thomas, p. 207.
- (35) Cf. Légasse, p. 39.
- (36) Cf. Légasse, p. 40.
- (37) Quoted in Swete, p. 212; on ἀγαπᾶω, cf. Taylor, p. 428.
- (38) Cf. Légasse, p. 42 (and his list on p. 43).
- (39) Cf. Lagrange, p. 251 (regard qui pénètre); Schweizer, pp. 212f.
- (40) Cf. Taylor, p. 429.
- (41) Cf. Branscomb, p. 183.
- (42) Légasse, p. 57.
- (43) Cf. Taylor, p. 429.
- (44) Cf. Légasse, p. 59.
- (45) Schweizer, p. 213.

- (46) Swete, p. 213.
(47) Cf. García, p. 30.
(48) Swete, p. 213.
(49) Wycliffe quoted in *ibid.*; the other quote is Swete's.
(50) Légasse, p. 61.
(51) Cf. Bauer, p. 456; García, p. 32 ('haciendas, fincas').
(52) Cf. Taylor, p. 430 (quotes Lagrange).
(53) Cf. Légasse, p. 62.
(54) Cf. García, p. 32; it 'probably goes back to Jesus', Best, p. 111.
(55) Cf. García, p. 32.
(56) Cf. Taylor, p. 430; Swete: οἱ τα χρήματα ἔχοντες ('they who have money'): "The wider word which is preferred here includes all property whether in coin or convertible into it", p. 214 (citations omitted).
(57) *Ibid.*
(58) Cf. Lagrange, p. 252, and Taylor, pp. 431f.
(59) Cf. Best, p. 111.
(60) The last quote is from Adolf Schlatter, Kommentar zum Matthäusev., 1929, ad loc., cited in Michel, p. 593f, from which is taken the rest.
(61) *Ibid.*
(62) Cf. Taylor, p. 431.
(63) Cf. Lagrange, pp. 252f.
(64) Cf. García, p. 30; Best, p. 111.
(65) Cf. García, p. 32; Swete, p. 216.
(66) Cf. Best, p. 111. Meadland believes that the leaders of the Church questioned potential adherents of the "Jesus movement" about their willingness to contribute to the relief of the poor, if they had property, just like at Qumram, though there it was obligatory (p. 72). (Ananias and Sapphira, cf. Acts 5, however, did not seem to have benefitted from the voluntary nature of their donation.) Meadland cites the case of Barnabas, who did contribute his property to the community (cf. Acts 4:32ff.), p. 23. "The earliest Church found that few rich men entered its ranks. At a later stage in the formation of Mark's Gospel, we may be right to detect signs of a slight modification of the earlier outlook, and some anxiety about its severity."
(67) Cf. Coulot, p. 252. The whole of c. 10 regards sacrifice and renunciation for the kingdom, cf. Taylor, p. 425.
(68) Swete, p. 214.
(69) Cf. Best, p. 112.
(70) Cf. Taylor, p. 432; Best, p. 111.
(71) Cf. Best, p. 110.
(72) Cf. Taylor, p. 432.
(73) Cf. Best, p. 110.
(74) Cf. Taylor, p. 432.
(75) Cf. Riga, p. 1123; Best, p. 111; Légasse, p. 62.
(76) Cf. Branscomb, p. 182.
(77) Cf. Boguslawski, p. 234.
(78) "On Lazarus," Migne P.G. 48, 991, quoted in Leuridan, p. 63.
(79) "Homily in time of famine and drought," Migne P.G. 31, 321, *ibid.* (my translation from the Spanish).
(80) Cf. Basil, "Homily against the rich," Migne P.G. 31, 285, quoted in Leuridan, p. 20; Ambrose, "Book on Nabot of Yizreel," Migne P.L., 14, 779f., quoted in Leuridan, p. 21.

- (81) Jesus, in Mt 25, does not emphasize explicit discipleship, but doing acts of mercy to the poor; cf. Mt 7:21-27; also Gregory Nazianzen, "On love for the poor," Migne P.G., 35, 909; García, p. 32, says that the man's sin consists not in having riches, but that he is rich when others are poor; cf. Lk 16.
- (82) Cited by Swete, p. 213 (along with Jn 13:29, etc.), who states: "The destitute poor (Πτωχοί) were a numerous class in Palestine in the first century, and one for which no regular provision was made."
- (83) Cf. Laws, book V, 742eff.: "But to be at once exceedingly wealthy and good is impossible.... I can never concede to them that a rich man is truly happy unless he is also a good man, but that one who is exceptionally good should be exceptionally wealthy too is a mere impossibility." He attributes this to the fact that "the profits of righteousness and iniquity together are more than double those from righteousness alone, while the expenditure of one who will spend neither honorably nor discredibly is less by half than that of one who is ready to lay out money honorably on honorable objects."
- (84) Cf. Taylor, p. 429f.
- (85) Cf. Swete, p. 213; Daniel-Rops, p. 152: the people of Palestine were very poor (S.W. Baron called it "horrible"), and this was a 'stock subject for mirth in the pagan comedies ... 'The daughters of Israel are beautiful,' said one rabbi sadly. 'It is a pity that they should be made ugly by poverty.'"
- (86) This is not the place to discuss the concrete ways to implement social justice; suffice it to say that it remains the imperative of all humankind, and Christians a fortiori. Says Basil: "The sentence is indeed very clear, and infallible he who gave it; however, rare are those who believe it. 'And how shall we live—you tell me—if we renounce everything? What form would life take if all sold and all relinquished their goods?' Do not ask me for the understanding of the commandments of the Lord. He who gave the law knows how to adjust to it even the impossible. Here your heart is examined as in a balance, to see if it inclines toward the true life or toward the present fruitions." "Homily against the rich," Migne P.G., 31, 277, quoted in Leuridan, p. 159.
- (87) Migne P.G. 35, 909 ("On love for the poor"), quoted in Leuridan, p. 158.

Final Note.

A related theme which also is treated by the Fathers is that wealth can only be acquired through iniquity. "Can you demonstrated to me --says Chrysostom-- that (your riches) were acquired justly, going back in the family? You cannot. Their origin and root of necessity proceeds from iniquity." "On the Letter to Timothy," Migne P.G. 62, 563, quoted in Leuridan, p. 36. "It is not possible to enrich oneself without committing a thousand iniquities. Christ himself led us to understand this when he said: 'Make yourselves friends with the Mammon of iniquity' (Lk 16). 'What if --you reply-- one has received the inheritance from one's father?' Why, he has received what was gathered by dint of iniquities. ... (he must have had many ancestors) who appropriated and benefitted from the things of others." Op. cit., 561, quoted in Leuridan, p. 35.

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Very good paper in terms of sound exegetical observations on each verse.

Rich annotation but a bit excessive (87 footnotes for 10 pages is a rather high ratio). The aspect of contrast between riches and destitution well presented.

The Patristic material appropriately used but limited (There are basic Patristic passages interpretive of Mk. 10, 17-27 which deal with ideas other than the ones mentioned in your paper). Something more could be said concerning the Christology of the passage and the idea of discipleship.

A-