

Mark 10:17-31

A popular catch phrase, or motto, these days is “live your best life.” There’s even a whole Instagram page called #liveyourbestlife.

It has nearly 3 million posts. Mostly it’s pictures of people doing amazing things. If you watched the sun rise while you were hiking in Martinique and followed it up with avocado toast and a kale smoothie, you’re living your best life.

If you’ve managed to turn your passion into a 6 figure income while working at home, you’re living your best life.

If you’ve petted an elephant in a river in Thailand, you’re living your best life.

A lot of the posts are about living life on your own terms. They’re about family and friends, health and fitness, travel and meaningful work.

They truly are mostly very cool things. I would have to say a lot of what I do is based on wanting to live my best life...doing triathlons...doing work I love...traveling...spending time with family and friends.... I’m guessing most of us in whatever way we can try to live our best life. And I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that in a lot of ways. God gives life to us so we can live it to the fullest.

The problem is that, at least from our cultural perspective, living your best life seems to require a life of privilege...a life where living your best life looks pretty expensive.

And in many ways, it’s about improving your situation...working your way up.

It seems like the man in today’s story should be living his best life. He has money to enjoy the finer things... Good food...good wine. And he’s not only rich, but good! He’s followed all the commandments from his childhood. He has likely reaped benefits of that...love of God...love for family and neighbors.

But there seems to be something missing. He’s learned about Jesus, apparently heard his teaching. He knows that Jesus is offering more...Jesus offers eternal life.

But the cost for that eternal life is steep...too steep it turns out. Sell everything he owns and give it to the poor? Instead of working his way up, Jesus has this man working his way down. That’s pretty much the opposite of what our culture says is living your best life.

For many people, there are not too many passages in the gospel more troubling than this one. Those from some faith traditions who read this very literally worry that their wealth means they'll suffer in hell for all eternity.

Some say, but if every rich person did this, it would just mean the rich and the poor trade places...and then they would get too attached to their wealth and the cycle would go on forever.

Besides, if everyone was poor, who would pay for the things we need to live? Who'd pay taxes for schools and roads and so on.

In the archives of sermon history, lots of preachers have wrestled with this and tried to explain it away or make it spiritual and say it's not what Jesus really literally meant.

So I have to admit significant discomfort, both reading this as a follower of Christ, and as a preacher who has to deal with it from up here.

First of all, let's just put it out there...there are Christians who do in fact literally do this. Catholic men and women who join some of the religious communities take vows of poverty.

That doesn't typically mean they live in the streets, although it has at times. What it does mean is that they don't personally own property. Rather property is owned by the community. Some of those communities are ancient, and others, such as The Simple Way in Philadelphia, are much more recent.

Mother Theresa is perhaps the most famous example of someone who did exactly what Jesus said here.

Jesus' disciples, after hearing what Jesus had to say, thought for a minute and said "hey! that's what we did."

But I'll have to confess, I'm not sure I could do it. And I'm definitely not currently taking stock of our money and possessions in order to give it ALL away! Some for sure...but really, ALL?

But if I'm not able to, am I missing something?

Let's talk for just a minute about eternal life. We too often think eternal life is only what happens after we die. But eternal life started a long time ago...and goes on into eternity. We're living in eternity right now.

It's pretty much the same thing as saying we're living in the Kingdom of God right now, even if it's not yet finished.

Of course there is more beyond here and now...the sacrifices of being a disciple may be incredibly difficult, but they are not futile.

Our call to follow Jesus is headed somewhere...it's headed to the fulfillment of God's reign.

But is there a way to think about this in the here and now?

I think yes. First of all, Jesus looked at this man and loved him. The hard words he has for the man come from a place of love and knowing him and what he really needs, deep down.

Jesus has that same love for us. And Jesus knows our weaknesses, just as he knew this man's...and loves us anyway. But then Jesus calls us to more.

Think of eternal life not so much in terms of time but depth. In John's gospel, Jesus tells a Samaritan woman that he is living water, gushing up to eternal life.

Jesus is eternal life and when we follow him, we tap into that living water.

Eternal life in the here and now is like a flow of water filling our cups over and over.

The refreshment and nourishment from that water gives us the courage and commitment to live as Jesus' disciples. And this man's possessions were like the dam that blocked that flow.

We all have dams too – things we're not willing to let go of. Things that block us from living fully in the kingdom.

Yours may be money and possessions, but there are other things that dam up that flow.

I'm not going to tie this up neatly. I don't know if any of us are called to sell everything and give it to the poor.

I also can't say that following Jesus will ensure you live your best life, at least in the terms we usually define it. In fact it probably won't.

So what is in it for you?

Well, if we're talking about just you, you got Jesus. That's something pretty great. It's just that Jesus doesn't promise you your best life, at least by our standards.

Instead, he promises the Kingdom of God. And it's only in the giving up of those attachments to worldly things that we get that.

Will it be your best life? Yes...not because you benefit but because we all do. The kingdom of God isn't an individual thing.

The kingdom of God is a new community. In that new community, there won't be rich or poor. Maybe I can't live my best life until others...particularly the poor and suffering...are living their best life too.

If we who are wealthy give up more so the poor have what they need, we are in fact already living in the kingdom of God, at least as best we can now.

If we don't, we're not.

If we can't, then thankfully for God all things are possible. One way or another, God is moving us toward that new community, the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is our best life....but it's a collective best life. Eternal life isn't just about me and my salvation. We are linked to everyone in this new life.

It is the life God is drawing us toward, not one we work our way up to.

So this passage makes us uncomfortable. We wonder what it means in terms of what our society should look like.

But, this is a holy discomfort...it's a sign that God is talking to you...revealing your attachments to the things of this world. And God is gradually pulling you, stretching you...like the camel through the eye of a needle...into the kingdom of God.