**Title: The One Promise of Jesus that Christians Can Render False**

A Sermon, prepared for delivery at Calvary Baptist Church, New Haven, CT

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**Text:** Mark 10:29-30, Jesus said, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mothers or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, house and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,*

*O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

-Psalm 19:14

Good morning brothers and sisters. It is an honor and joy to be with you this morning. I am thankful to David for the invitation to speak with you this morning. I’ve worshipped with you once before, when David came and preached his first sermon months ago, and it is a joy to be back with you. Even before I met David, though, several years ago I remember my friend Malcolm Foley coming and preaching in this pulpit and telling me and the rest of his friends all about the wonderful people he met there. I can say of you what Paul said to the Thessalonians: “your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we do not need to say anything” else about it. So thank you, brothers and sisters, for your faithfulness.

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If you want to know what a person values, listen to the way they introduce themselves. Our self-introductions all start out the same: “my name is…” but then they are wide open for interpretation. What do we say next? Our hobbies? Our family? Our job? Our ethnicity? Our level of education? If you were to do this experiment with me, what you’d typically hear is something like this: “My name is Justin Hawkins. I am a PhD student at Yale studying religion and politics. I have ambitions of becoming a professor, though if that is impossible, I might want to go into politics.” From this introduction – which I must say at least once a day – you learn several things: (1) I value education and am likely going to be tempted toward finding my significance in how much of it I have; (2) professional and vocational ambition is a central component of human significance; (3) I do not seem to consider the place of my birth, my family, or perhaps even my religion to be among the most important things you ought to know about me. Now, I don’t want to insist this morning that we do, in fact, introduce ourselves differently and bombastically as Christians before we say anything else about ourselves; much of this practice is culture-specific.

But our text this morning introduces us to a character who goes nameless; it is merely said that he is young, and that he is rich. These, especially the second one, seems to be the most important thing about him. And Jesus goes about trying to reorient that man’s markers of identity. In our passage for this morning, we encounter two different models of Jesus reorienting the priorities of two different groups: (1) this rich young man, who rejects this re-orientation; and (2) his disciples, who have accepted Jesus’ reorientation of their identities, and now want to know: what happens now, Jesus? It is this second group that I want to pay attention to this morning, and in looking there, I want to show three things:

1. The way that the gospel re-orients our affiliations.
2. The consolation that comes to those who are willing to let God re-orient their affiliations.
3. The responsibility of the Church to meet this demand of Christ.

But in order to do that, we have to get a running start by looking at the previous verses. And before we can do that properly, we ought to pray once again.

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*First, I want us to see the way that the gospel re-orients our affiliations.*

Jesus has just seen a rich young man approach him with what seemed like genuine intention to convert: “teaching, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” We might imagine that anyone who truly thinks that eternal life exists, would also think it worth sacrificing anything to attain it. But Jesus’ response shows that not to be true: “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” (v.21). Behind Jesus’ strange response to the young man we might discern the principle he stated elsewhere: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). And so, to expose the fact that this young man was, in fact, of a divided mind, Jesus demands that he choose which master he will serve: his riches, or Jesus himself. Mark tells us that, at least at this moment, the young man made his choice, and “he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:22).

Note the way that we have a hint from this text about what the rich young man’s problem truly was, and we get that hint from the way that Jesus expands out the category of things that we may be required to sacrifice in order to enter the kingdom. We begin by discussing money, and we end by discussing houses, lands, and even families. In the calling of the disciples, these are intertwined. We read earlier in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus’ calling required his disciples to leave family and money:

“Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men..’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boats mending their nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him” (Mark 1:16-20).

This still happens around the world today when God calls peoples to come out of their families and their peoples and their nations to pledge their allegiance to him alone. This is the meaning of that strange and difficult passage: “if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German theologian who stood against Hitler, was thinking of this passage when he wrote his famous sentence: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

And this is the clearest opportunity we have in this text to give an exposition of the Christian gospel: allegiance to Christ above all things, forsaking any other means of salvation.

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*Secondly this morning, I want us to see the consolation that comes to those who are willing to let God re-orient their affiliations.*

This is a passage that commentators frequently pass over because of its extreme difficulty. This is what struck me most in preparing for this sermon this morning: many of the great saints throughout Church history whose minds I usually consult for help in understanding the Bible were silent on this particular point of confusion: “in this time.” An easy way to interpret many of the promises of Christ in the New Testament is to defer them to the New Heaven and the New Earth, and that interpretive strategy is often legitimate and correct. But it is not possible here with this phrase “in this life,” which is clearly contrasted with “in the age to come.” The difficulty lies not in understanding what is said, but in understanding how it can possibly be true. John Calvin, for example, sees the difficulty in this text:

“But what he promises about recompensing them a hundredfold appears not at all to agree with experience; for in the greater number of cases, those who have been deprived of their parents, or children, and other relatives – who have been reduced to widowhood, and stripped of their wealth, for the testimony of Christ – are so far from recovering their property, that in exile, solitude and desertion, they have a hard struggle with severe poverty.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

How then are we understand this difficult passage? One way that is certainly *not* true is the way taught by those of the Prosperity Gospel. It would be strange indeed if Jesus were to say that great riches makes it difficult to enter into the kingdom, but once we decide to follow him, we will be given great riches. Instead, the consolation that must come

Instead, I think that we ought to understand this passage as referring to the way that God *reconstitutes our property and family within the church.* This was the way Jonathan Edwards read this passage:

“i.e. they should be the means of the conversion of the world. The world should be given into their hands, should be brought to embrace their doctrine, and their word should be the standard of their faith and rule of their worship and practice. And thus they had "houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children" an hundredfold. They had the houses of all the Christians to receive them. And at their service they had brethren and sisters, for all Christians were such in Christ. They had mothers, for so were the churches of Christ. We may observe in the foregoing verse, their forsaking fathers is mentioned; but fathers are not put in here as being restored an hundredfold, but only mothers. They had many mothers, but only one father, even their heavenly Father. They were to have children, for so were those they converted, and lands, for most regions of the earth were to be given to 'em.**[5](http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbi9uZXdwaGlsby9nZXRvYmplY3QucGw/cC4xNDo5OC53amVv" \l "note1" \o "view footnote)** The meek shall then "inherit the earth" [*Matthew 5:5*].”[[2]](#footnote-2)

But if it is true that this passage is to be understood as referring to the reconfiguration of our identities within the church, how can we make sense of this? I would like to look now at two examples from the Bible about how Christianity reorients our affiliations with family, and one example of how it reorients our affiliation with property.

The first example of how the gospel transforms the family is the example of singleness. Throughout the Old Testament Law, it is clear that singleness – and barren childlessness, its natural complement – is a curse. It is a sign of God’s displeasure. Yet in the book of Isaiah we begin to see a strange prediction that things will not always be so. In Isaiah 56 we read:

and let not the eunuch say,  
    “Behold, I am a dry tree.”  
For thus says the Lord:  
“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
    who choose the things that please me  
    and hold fast my covenant,  
I will give in my house and within my walls  
    a monument and a name  
    better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
    that shall not be cut off.

We have here a mysterious prophecy that somehow the curse that lies on barrenness in the Law of Moses will be reversed. But it is not clear what that might mean until we arrive at the New Testament, when Jesus gives a striking response to his disciples’ assertion that certainly it might be better not to marry:

“Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. **12**For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (Matt. 19:11-12).

This phrase of ‘eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom’ is a brand new category, and even here it is ambiguous, until we reach Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. The New Testament gives us a vivid picture of this reconfiguration and reconstitution of the family in the figures of Paul and Timothy. From 1 Corinthians 7, we learn that Paul is unmarried. It is likely that as a Pharisee of high rank and advanced age, he would have married at some point in his life. Whether he became a widower from his wife’s premature death, or whether she divorced him when he became a Christian, we know that was single by the time of his apostolic ministry. Nowhere in the Bible do we hear that he had children. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice, and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Tim. 5-6). There is, you will notice, no mention of a sincere faith present in Timothy’s father. From this we might be able to infer that Timothy is either a biological orphan, or he is a spiritual orphan because his biological father does not believe the gospel. So we have then a single man with no children, and a young man with no father. It is with all of this in the background – all of this theological reworking of the family in the back of his mind that Paul writes to “Timothy, my beloved son” (2 Tim. 1:2) He is even more effusive in his praise of Timothy to the Corinthians when he calls him “Timothy, my beloved and faithful son” (1 Cor. 4:17).

I am sure there are family dynamics that play themselves out in Chinese families in a distinctive sort of way, and I will not understand those dynamics because I do not have a first-person experience of them, and therefore I cannot speak much about them. But I will say this: for parents who are consecrated to God, you can make it easier or more difficult for your children to pursue the desires and vocation to which the Lord is calling them.

I remember when I left a relatively fundamentalist upbringing to go first to a secular undergraduate education at Georgetown University, and then to a liberal theological education at Yale Divinity School – a school that my parents had good reason of which to be suspicious given the kind of theology taught there. I was convinced that God was calling me to both of these places, and my parents did not fight me on them in the slightest. I asked them as we drove up to New Haven: “mom and dad, why are you letting me do this?” And then answered me “Well, we know that you love Jesus, and we know that you try to do what he tells you to do. And we trust you, and we trust the working of the Holy Spirit in you.” So my following of Christ did not entail the loss of my mother and father, brothers and sisters. Parents, I do not know the particular desires you have for your children, but I would exhort you with this: make it easy for your children to follow the Lord.

This is how Christianity reconfigures the family. How does it reconfigure our property as well? The clearest indication we have of this is likely the way that property was handled among the early church, which we read about in Acts 2:

Acts 2:44-47, “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praise God and having favor with all the people.”

We see here the fulfillment of precisely the promise of Jesus, where those who gave up ‘houses and lands’ for the sake of the gospel now find themselves without any need, because of the Christ-imitating generosity of the other Christians who surrendered their rights to their own property in order to fulfill the promises of Jesus.

It may be that for some of you, all of this ‘giving up all things’ language seems foreign, as it does to me. If that is true for you, I would encourage you to do two things for self-reflection. First, consider whether you are truly a Christian. It may be that this great divergence between following Christ and attaining temporal fame and success never comes for us because we are always willing to pursue both. We have relatively few situations in our lives today where this kind of harsh decision is required of us. And Soren Kierkegaard, the great 19th century Danish Christian philosopher, thought that this dynamic was leading many to be deceived about the true state of their souls: “such is the situation in the triumphant church, where it pays exceedingly well to be a Christian, and where the only thing that doesn’t pay is not to be a Christian.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

If you have considered whether you are a Christian and determined yes, you are, then the second thing you are to do, you who have not had to sacrifice all these things is this: rejoice. Rejoice not that you have made it through unscathed and without sacrifices. No, your sacrifices come later – they come here: Rejoice that you have so many resources to share with others. This is the point of them. Your houses are for hospitality for other Christians. Your full cabinets are for feeding of stomachs other than your own. We do this through our offerings, through our charities – but also through face-to-face interactions with those who are in need of our assistance. “Welcome one another,” says Paul, “as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom. 15:7). And how has he welcomed us? He feeds us with lavish food. He prepares a place for us. He comes to dwell with us. Imitate him in all of these ways, dear brothers and sisters.

This brings us to the third and final point of this sermon this morning.

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*Thirdly and finally this morning, I want us to see the responsibility of the Church to meet this demand of Christ.*

And this is where the sharp barb of my sermon title comes from: *The One Promise of Jesus that Christians can Render False.* Do you see how so much of the consolation that is afforded to those who give up all these things is provided by God through his church? The church is commonly the means by which God directs his grace to his beloved. This is the meaning of the phrase that you are his body – you are his hands and feet.

And this dynamic can fail through our own unfaithfulness. This is what we read of in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul says there to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 11:17:

“But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you…When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.”

What is happening in this situation in Corinth is that the function of the gospel tearing down lines of division and then reconstituting a family, is not working. And the ones who suffer are those who, for one reason or another, have nothing in the churches. This may be the situation of some of you, and what we find here is that those who have felt themselves abandoned by their local church community are likely to be *precisely* the ones who are most attuned to the sufferings of the people around you. You know the signs because this has happened to you.

But while I do not want for a minute to walk back the very serious demands that this text places upon Christians, I want also to conclude that, of course, on the deepest possible level, the title of my sermon this morning is overstated. There is no promise of Christ that Christians can render false, for “all the promises of God are, in Christ, yes and amen” (2 Corinthians 1:20). If the local church fails to provide for the immediate needs of its parishoners, those congregants are still surrounded by a communion of saints, which encompasses even those who are dead in Christ. This is what is taught in Hebrews 12, that the faithful departed are still, in some unclear and mystical sense, involved in our lives. It is those saints and martyrs with whom even the most abandoned Christian in this life can have fellowship. John Calvin points in this direction:

Those who shall willingly lose all for the sake of Christ, will be more happy even in this life than if they had retained the full possession of them; but the chief reward is laid up for them in heaven.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

These great promises of heavenly reward are, even in this life, consoling, because in Christ, the kingdom of God is breaking into history. The kingdom of God is, even now, our inheritance: “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him in order that we might also be glorified with him”(Romans 8:16-17). You are now, as the brothers and sisters of Christ, the heirs of the kingdom of heaven *in this life, with persecutions* – as that text in Romans says.

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Conclusion: And so I return to the way I began this sermon: where do your primary identity markers lie? Have they been sacrificed, and brought back from the dead, and are they now at the ready for His service?

1. Calvin, *Commentary on Mark 10:29.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jonathan Edwards, *Notes on Scripture,* in WJEO 15:93. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Calvin, *Commentary on Mark 10:29.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)