St Mark 10:

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

Just when you think you can take Jesus to the bank… come ON! Let me tell you, the Lord of Lords can get on my nerves now and then. I suppose it’s payback, I have let him down from time to time, but STILL! This story just drives me NUTS. It’s a beautiful chance for Jesus to clear some important things up. It should be EASY. Jesus should say, Nope! You can’t be rich and follow me. There. Simple, easy, done. Would that not make it easier? MORE UNPOPULAR, sure, but EASIER.

OR Jesus could say: It doesn’t matter: Rich or poor, y’all are forgiven! Does Jesus do either of these things? NO. He’s as clear as mud today, and he’s given ME the job of trying to speak his Gospel. Thank you, Lord.

So, let’s do this. Let’s look back in v.17 in the First Reading, where this Trust Fund baby comes up to Jesus in the first place. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Fair question.

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone!”

There’s a tip off right there, that should tell us all what kind of mood Jesus is in. Why do you call me good? Give the Rich Guy a chance to think about it and he’d probably say, “Because I’m being POLITE!”

I mean, yeah, God is good. God is SO good, everyone pales in comparison. Right. Got that, thanks. So now I can’t use the word good anymore. Sit down to dinner with your family, you’ve made lasagna, you’re kid says, ‘This is really good!’ NO! You say, Nothing is Good but God alone!

How many of you folks watch Downton Abbey? Everyone on that show is ‘Good Sir!’ or My good man! How are you, good lady!” And it’s always “Good Day to you, ma’am! and Good day to you, sir! They’d have to rewrite the whole show. Or cancel it. There’s some Gospel right there.

So I’m annoyed with Jesus about that, now, too. Jesus goes on and lists the commandments for this guy, and he says he’s kept them from his youth. SURE you have, buddy. Because they’re so easy and all. Everyone else needs forgiveness, but you’re good. Everyone else needs God’s mercy, but not you, you commandment keeping rich guy. Right.  But does Jesus call him on it? I mean, come ON! He called out the Samaritan Woman at the Well, that time, when she said she had no husband, and Jesus said, “That’s the truth! The guy you’re living with now sure isn’t your husband!” Jesus can be cold when people lie to him! Don’t even try it!

But what happens here? “Jesus looked at him and loved him!” You’ve got to be KIDDING ME! This guy needs some truth right between the eyes, Jesus, like you smack down old Saint Peter: But you get all emotional on him - you’re going to let that whole “kept the commandments from my youth” thing slide, really? Really?

Well, Jesus doesn’t let this guy completely off the hook: “Go sell all your stuff, and give it away! And you’ll have treasure in heaven: Then come, follow me.”  Of course, the guy bolts. It’s a good thing, too, because if he HAD sold all, given it away, that would mean WE’d have to do all that, too. And let’s be real here: I wouldn’t have, and unless you’re way holier than I think you are, you wouldn’t either. Nor the vast majority of Christians through history. So don’t feel too bad for that guy. He did us all a big favor!

So Jesus looking at his puzzled disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And it says the disciples were perplexed. Why are the disciples perplexed?

When I think of Jesus’ band of merry men, I think of road weary, dusty people who I at least do not consider RICH. Maybe I’m wrong, but I’ve always thought of them towards the bottom of the heap, you know? So what’s the problem!  It’s not rocket science. Jesus send this rich guy packing, turns and Jesus says it’s hard to be rich and get in the kingdom.

Jesus tries to clarify with the whole Camel and the Eye of the Needle thing, and it says they were greatly astounded - so THAT didn’t work, apparently, and they say, “Then WHO can be saved?”

Am I missing something? The POOR can be saved, you bozos. Where did Jesus FIND these numbskulls in the first place? How hard can this be? There’s rich, and there’s poor. The rich are out, the poor are in. First shall be last, last first. Bam! Revolution! World turned upside down. Black and white, yes and no. Clear as crystal. We’re done here!

And that’s the problem, and the disciples spotted it even before Jesus did. No matter their mental brilliance, these guys know, we all know, that being rich, like being good, for instance, is relative. It’s RELATIVE. Because just like you may be good, but not compared to God, so you may be poor, but not compared to that poor sucker over there. You may be rich, but not like THAT guy’s rich. Look at that guy - HE’s rich!

When I was stationed in Okinawa, I flew Marines to the Philippines every month or so . These guys would fight it out on the hangar floors to get slots in those detachments - because a lance corporal in base housing in Okinawa is poor. He lives in a squad bay with a bunch of other Jarheads, eats at a Marine chow hall (shudder), and works with the same guys he lives with every day. A lance corporal in the Philippines, however, can rent his own apartment in town, hire a mamasan to keep house for him, and live like a king! On a lance corporal’s pay. I’d never seen the relative nature of wealth in my life, and I’ll never forget it!

So yeah, if what Jesus says is absolute, a lance corporal on Okinawa is a shoo in for eternal life. That same lance corporal in the philippines is hell bound for certain. The disciples grasp that. That’s why they’re puzzled with Jesus. I can just see Jesus looking at them, giving a shrug and saying, “Don’t worry about it. For you it’s impossible. But God can do anything.” Problem solved, case closed. Doesn’t matter about Camels and eyes-of-needles, because God can do anything. So don’t worry!

God can do anything. God can save a homeless drug user. God can save a spoiled Kardashian! God can save you! God can save ME! It’s true. But apparently, in the mystery of salvation, it’s HARDER for God to save the RICH than the POOR. And why is that?

The story goes that everyone who got orders for Okinawa became one of three things there. One, an alcoholic. Two, a gym rat. Or three, they got religion. Well, Carol and I got religion, no two ways about it. That rule did NOT hold true for the Philippines. The relative wealth spoiled everything - they didn’t BECOME anything! The relative wealth made them comfortable and they didn’t change one bit. Well, maybe they became alcoholic.

You can use money for lots of things, but often when you’ve enough of it, you insulate yourself from change. Because you CAN. It can protect you, and you begin to TRUST it. Trust it long enough and you will LOVE it. And then it’s your God. The False God that cannot save. The REAL God does NOT protect you from change. The REAL God WANTS change. The Real God cares about RICH: because God knows wealth can insulate and stifle growth and ruin God’s dream for us. God cares about POOR: because God knows poverty causes suffering and misery and can ruin God’s dream. God cares about RICH because God wants people to USE wealth to make the world better! God cares about POOR because God HATES suffering and misery. God loves EVERYONE but God REFUSES to leave people where they are: neither exposed in miserable poverty, nor insulated in wealth that protects and entombs us. And though it seems impossible to us, it’s possible with God. It’s ALWAYS possible with God. Some things are even probable with God. If you’re in pain, hurting, God’s help is on the way. If you trust in your wealth, comfortable and secure, God’s help is on the way. You may not welcome it, but it’s coming. Because God loves you, but God wants more. More FOR you, more FROM you. God wants more.