

## Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – October 14, 2018

### Hebrews 4:12-16 & Mark 10:17-31

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

#### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

#### **Commentary on Hebrews 4:12-16**

(From *Homiletics*; “The Surgical Scriptures”, October 14, 2012)

Lacking both the salutation and farewell of a typical epistle, Hebrews is not so much a letter as it is a treatise that frequently reads like a sermon. Internal evidence strongly suggests Hebrews is intended for an established congregation that is presently in need of regaining their focus on being mindful of and responsive to their inheritance of a great salvation (see 1:14-2:4). The author succinctly describes the situation this way: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God" (5:12). Hebrews is an urgent call for the renewal of a community of faith whose commitment to and confidence in Christ are in danger of, if not already, waning.

Given this urgency, it is not unusual to encounter elements of warning and encouragement throughout Hebrews, often occurring in tandem. Such is the case with Hebrews 4:12-16. On the one hand, 4:12-14 alerts us to be aware of the sacred surgical precision with which the word of God "divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow," penetrating into the core of who we are "to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). Nothing escapes the thorough scrutiny of the "eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (4:13), especially the degree of our faithfulness.

On the other hand, 4:14-16 assures us that we face this scrutiny supported by the intercessory presence of Jesus, "our great high priest" (4:14), who though sinless can "sympathize with our weaknesses" (4:15) and understand firsthand what it is to undergo the tests and temptations of our human condition. Knowing the intercessory presence of Jesus is the substance of the confession of faith to which the author exhorts us to "hold fast" (4:14). Knowing this, likewise, emboldens us to approach judgment, for in and through Jesus we are granted forgiveness ("receive mercy") and blessing ("find grace") "to help in time of need" (4:16).

Identifying the reality that we stand in need of the help of Jesus' intercession underscores the dynamic of warning and encouragement operating in Hebrews 4:12-16, for this reality simultaneously pinpoints the problem -- the gravity of needing Jesus' help -- and the solution -- the grace of getting Jesus' help. The gravity of our need is exemplified by these words of vigilance prior to 4:12-16: "Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end" (3:12-14). The promises of divine grace are sure, but we must never underestimate or take for granted all that such grace has helped us, and continues to help us, overcome.

The grace of Jesus' help is emphasized throughout Hebrews by way of extensive references to his role as high priest (ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς). It is a compelling metaphor that portrays Jesus as making intercession not only by offering a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, but also by actually being the sacrifice itself. This has some profound implications for our holding fast as disciples.

When it comes to our being steadfast, Jesus is depicted as the high priest and intercessor who does not expect anything of us that he has not already done himself. With respect to whether we meet expectations concerning our obedience, faithfulness, endurance and sacrifice, Hebrews makes it abundantly clear that Jesus himself has already been obedient and faithful, endured much, and submitted to being sacrificed. He is not unfamiliar with the rigors and trials of doing God's will and has amply met all heavenly expectations.

Fully meeting heavenly expectations is not an accomplishment Jesus lords over us as cause to stand on privilege or coldly judge us. Instead, familiarity with the rigors and trials of doing the will of God causes Jesus to sympathize (συμπαθεῖν, "to feel or suffer with another") with us regarding the difficulty of the task of discipleship. Such sympathizing results in the extension of mercy and grace intended to empower us with the spiritual wherewithal we need to hold fast as disciples. Jesus is the high priest whose intercession includes giving us the strength to do what is expected of us.

All of this points to how Jesus exercises his sovereignty through an attitude of solidarity with us. The commitment highlighted in Hebrews 4:12-16 is to the One who is already fully committed to us. We are helped in time of need by the intercession of a high priest who from his own experience sympathizes with how we have to face tribulation -- sympathizes with acts of solidarity that overcome tribulation.

The challenge, of course, is how faithfully we will respond and hold fast to such divine solidarity.

In the long run, Hebrews 4:12-16 present two ways of facing God's judgment. One portends having to weather a rather harrowing inquisition, reflecting the gravity of needing Jesus' help (4:12-14). The other shows an open path to exoneration, reflecting the grace of getting Jesus' help (4:14-16). Here, the matter is not necessarily to choose one path over the other. The author of Hebrews holds these two ways in creative tension, wisely using the dynamics of warning and encouragement to alert us to the gravity while assuring us of the grace. Awareness of the need points us to the help. Thus, we are called to the renewal of our commitment to and confidence in Jesus, whose intercessory presence reveals that no matter how great the need, the help is greater still.

## **Commentary on Mark 10:17-31**

(From *Homiletics*; "The 100 Percent Rule", October 14, 2018)

As Jesus comes closer to Jerusalem, he hits closer to home with some of the most discomfiting and disheartening judgments anyone could hear. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus spoke about divorce — messing around in our regions of relationships, loyalty and integrity. Now, in this text, Jesus really gets personal — moving from marriage to money. His message is so startling and discouraging, that he frightens one potential convert away, and strikes doubt and despair into the hearts of his own disciples.

In verse 17, the journey motif continues as Jesus prepares to leave his temporary dwelling place and continue on his "way." But before this journey commences, an apparently very eager man places himself in Jesus' path and, it would seem, in Jesus' hands. Kneeling before Jesus in a humble position of respect, this man clearly recognizes both Jesus' goodness and wisdom.

First, he addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher" — using the term ἀγαθὸς to indicate "kind" or "beneficent." Mark has switched Matthew's placement of the word "good" in his version of this story, making it part of the man's personal address to Jesus, not part of his question about eternal life (see Matthew 19:16ff). Instead, Mark's version highlights the man's respect for Jesus, and adds a storehouse of poignancy and tenderness that Matthew's more theologically sophisticated text misses.

Second, the man asks Jesus what he must do to "inherit" the eternal life he desires. "Inherit" is a good translation choice here, for the term κληρονομῆσαι literally means "to receive by lot." Jewish tradition understood Israel's

chosenness as entirely a condition of receiving God's lot. Thus, eternal life was truly a divinely bestowed gift, a free inheritance, determined by that lot. The "eternal life" this man desires is part of an eschatological, not just a salvational, question. Essentially, this man is asking Jesus, "What must I do in the resurrection from the dead so that eternal life will be my lot?" (also see Daniel 12:2).

Instead of directly answering this man's question, Jesus first homes in on that reference to "goodness." Since Mark has changed the man's initial inquiry, Jesus' response no longer seems to fit the situation as logically as it does in Matthew's version. However, Mark may have left the response as it was, believing that the explicit reference to "God alone" as good forges a link between verse 18 and verse 19. The Shema — the great confession of Judaism, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4) — is articulated after the recitation of the rest of the Ten Commandments. It may be that since verse 19 recites a short-form litany of those commandments, Mark intends his reader to make this confessional connection.

The commandments quoted in verse 19 (from Exodus 20:12-16 and Deuteronomy 5:16-20) include, in order, numbers 6, 7, 8, 9 and 5. Mark's unique addition "do not defraud" is believed by some to be his attempt at articulating commandment number 10 ("You shall not covet"), while others see it as an extension of number 8 ("You shall not steal"). After the rather incomplete version of the commandments Jesus recites to this man, the man insists, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth" (v. 20).

Mark's penchant for personalizing his text is recorded in both Matthew and Luke: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said ..." (v. 21). Mark especially likes to add touches about Jesus "seeing" or "looking," as well as articulating the emotions Jesus feels at any given time. Some translations have suggested that Mark's use of the term *hgaphsen* indicates that Jesus actually reached out and gently "caressed" this ardent, yet ignorant, seeker. Whatever the case, from Mark's text we get a sense of Jesus' regard and compassion for this man whose questions seem so sincere.

In light of this empathy, Jesus' command and the man's response seem all the more poignant. While Jesus states that the man lacks "one thing," he actually gives him two commands. First, he is to go, sell what he has and give it all to the poor. Second, he is to come and follow Jesus — a path that will lead him to the eternal life he seeks. Now all comes crashing down. This man is no longer enthusiastic but "shocked." This man is no longer eager; he is "sorrowful" or "grieving," "for he had many possessions." He judges the cost of eternal life too high and sadly leaves.

Verses 23-31 continue the lesson begun in verse 17, but Jesus' audience has now changed. The seeking man, now revealed as a rich man, has departed the scene, leaving Jesus and his disciples alone to discuss this matter further. Jesus' statement in verse 23 explicitly connects the two bits of information we now know about the man who had come to him; entering the kingdom of God and possessing an abundance of riches are put in tension. Remember that both Jesus' "kingdom of God" and the rich man's "eternal life" are part of a larger issue — the *eschaton*. Implicit in any eschatological discussion is the day of judgment. On that last day, it will be determined who enters into the kingdom of God and thus receives eternal life, and who is turned away from the kingdom toward death. That wealth and entry into this kingdom might be negatively related is an astonishing idea, especially since riches were generally assumed to be a sign of God's favor.

In case we haven't been adequately shocked the first time, however, Mark highlights this statement by specifying that the disciples are "perplexed" or "amazed" at such an idea, and by having Jesus reiterate how difficult it is to enter the kingdom. Jesus further dramatizes this difficulty by offering the mind-sticking image of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Commentators who have tried to soften the impossibility of such a feat by speculating about some actual small, narrow gate through the city walls of Jerusalem do a disservice both to Jesus' creative imagery and his challenging theology. Jesus' point is made succinctly in verse 27 — it is impossible for men and women to save themselves, whatever their financial state. Only through God is there a possibility for salvation (see Genesis 18:14; Job 42:2; Zechariah 8:6 for similar assertions).

This section concludes with Mark casting the disciples in an uncharacteristically positive light. First, Peter reminds Jesus and the readers that the disciples have already done exactly what Jesus had asked of the rich man — given up everything they had and followed him. In effect, Jesus agrees with Peter by promising that for all the things his disciples have given up for his sake, they will receive back "a hundredfold." Mark's text is a bit convoluted here, as

he uses elements both from Matthew's version — where rewards are accorded only after the *eschaton* — and Luke's version, which promises good things both now and in the age to come. To keep everything from sounding too reward-oriented, Mark's text asserts that both blessings and persecutions will be showered on Jesus' followers in this age. But Mark maintains that the gift of eternal life is theirs in the age to come.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org).

## Reflection Questions on Hebrews 4:12-16:

1. How do you react when you first read this passage? Did it sound like good news or bad news to you? Why?
2. Might the reference to being naked before God (v. 13) be an allusion to the story of the Garden and the creation / fall of humanity? How does your reading and interpretation of this passage change with that allusion in mind?
3. Worshipping now in a non-priestly tradition, what do you make of the image of Jesus as a “high priest”? Is there still something of value in this image, or is it purely an outdated metaphor?

## Reflection Questions on Mark 10:17-31:

1. Compare and contrast this version of the story with those found in Matthew (19:16-30) and Luke (18:18-30). If you have access, a copy of *Gospel Parallels* would be very helpful! What similarities and differences do you note? While the vast majority of biblical scholars have concluded that Mark was the first gospel to be written, with both Matthew and Luke using it as a source, the commentator quoted above holds the opposite view – with interpretations based on an understanding of what Mark “changed” from Matthew and Luke. Do any of the similarities or differences you note change significantly when you take one position or the other?
2. Note which of the commandments Jesus quotes to the inquiring man when he turns the man's question back on himself (v.19). Do you notice anything about them that might be significant? Like which commandments are quoted and which are not?
3. Do you think this passage/interaction between Jesus and the rich man is really about wealth? Or something else? What is the real “heart of that matter”?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**