

## Group Notes

**Text:** Mark 4.7, 18-19; 10.17-22

### *Personal Achievement*

#### **Context and Background**

**Context (Parable):** Jesus' parable about the sower and soils is the first parable found in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus used this parable to indicate both why he taught in parables and the importance of hearing and responding appropriately to his teaching. The main point of the parable concerns hearing. Hearing, in this context, involves more than listening but listening and engaging with what Jesus is saying. In this parable, Jesus described four different ways of hearing and responding to his words. The third way of hearing involves receiving the words of Jesus without giving them priority in one's life. Instead, this person receives the words of Jesus but counts them as one of many competing pulls on their life. The end result is the choking or blunting of faith and its transforming work in life.

**Background (Wealth):** The topic of wealth is one of the most frequently raised issues in Scripture. In the Old Testament, all wealth is viewed as originating from God because as creator, He possesses all things (Ps. 50.10-12). Thus wealth, when possessed by people, was due to the blessing or gifting of God. Wealth itself is therefore neutral, something given by God (Is. 45.14; 60.5, 11). However, the gift of wealth brought with it responsibility, the opportunity to do good, and be a blessing to others. It was when this opportunity was refused that wealth was viewed negatively. Interestingly, it is the refusal to use wealth according to its intended purpose that is most often the subject of Scriptures focusing on wealth. In the Old Testament, this use of wealth was synonymous with greed. The prophets regularly noted that wealth was often built by oppressing the poor (Is. 10.1-2; Ez. 22.25-29; Amos 2.6; 5.11). Further, wealth was often used to refer to the "wicked" (Ps. 10, 12, 37, 41, 52, 72). Across the Old Testament, one finds a constant critique of wealth, specifically against the refusal to view God as the source of wealth and the refusal to use wealth properly, to do good and be a blessing. The New Testament continues this same critique. Across the New Testament, the wealthy/rich are often synonymous with the greedy. Wealth is viewed as a force that competes with God and His Kingdom work in the world (Matt. 6.21, 24). The New Testament points out two main problems with wealth. First, wealth is often achieved by its pursuit. However, the pursuit of wealth is viewed as a rejection of God as the sole leader of one's life (Matt. 6.19-34; 1 Tim. 6.6-9). Second, the possession of wealth often leads one to seek a life of luxury and ease, to use wealth for one's own benefit rather than to do good and be a blessing to others (Lk. 12.15-21; James 5.1-6). This self-centered focus is strongly condemned in the New Testament with the judgment of God falling upon those who hoard wealth for themselves to the neglect of others (Lk. 12.16-21). Instead, followers of Christ are reminded of God's ultimate intent for wealth, its use to bless others (1 Tm. 6.17-19). Overall, wealth in the New Testament is neutral. It can be used positively (Acts 4.32-37). However, the general trend seems to be a misuse and misunderstanding of wealth that leads to a stumbling in one's pursuit of God and a strong rebuke in respect to the nature and focus of life (Mk. 4.18-19; James 5.1-6). If one were to sum up the Bible's portrait of wealth one would find two main points. (1) Wealth is a blessing from God that is (2) meant to be used to bless and care for others.

#### **The Text**

**Wealth's deceitful chokehold (Mark 4.7, 18-19):** In these verses, Jesus discusses the third unfruitful way of hearing and responding to his words. This manner of hearing involves a competition between Jesus' words and the pursuit and desire for wealth. Wealth in the ancient world consisted of more than physical possessions, but could also be viewed in terms of status and position within society. Thus, wealth was the possession of what mattered most according to worldly standards. Jesus states that those who receive his words but place them on equal standing with the pursuit for wealth in its largest sense (worries of life and desires for other things), find their faith in a deep strangle-hold. Like a plant among thorns, the faith of these people is slowly suffocated so that they bear no fruit and experience no growth. Faith stands no chance when Jesus' words are not given priority and wealth and its pursuit and use are not given their proper place.

**Wealth's chokehold in real life (Mark 10.17-22):** Wealth, its possession and use are and were an important part of life. The desire and pursuit of wealth is so ingrained that often people miss its insidious effects. However, a dialogue between Jesus and a man who possessed great wealth illustrates the strangling effects wealth can have upon faith. As Jesus is ministering in the region of Judea, he is approached by a young man who desires to know what he must do to possess eternal life. His question basically is a request to be part of what Jesus is doing. Jesus responds to the man by referring to God alone as good, which some see as an implicit claim of divinity for himself. He then points the young man back to the second half of the Ten Commandments, those commandments which guided one's relationship with other people (Ex. 20.12-17). What is interesting is that Jesus does not refer to the first half of the Ten Commandments, those commandments which guide one's relationship with God (Ex. 20.1-11). The young man affirms that he has treated people properly, something Jesus seems to affirm with his love for the man. However, Jesus indicates that the man must still do something. He must not only relate to people properly. He must also relate to God properly. God must have first place as Moses commanded. The young man must sell all of his possessions and follow in complete faith, trusting God for treasure. Jesus calls for a proper view and use of wealth. The young man refuses and declines to follow. He will not place wealth under God, and thus he cannot express faith. His faith is choked by his view and pursuit of wealth.

**Application:** Wealth. Its possession and pursuit are part of the American dream, but according to Jesus one of the biggest stumbling blocks to our experience of God's dream for us. Wealth when viewed properly is a gift from God, something to be used for others rather than for ourselves. However, God and His Kingdom are often victims of our unquenchable desire for achievement, possession, and attainment. Slowly and surely this pursuit of wealth suffocates our faith. What life might we find if rather than pursuing wealth we learned contentment, sought simplicity, and pursued generosity as we placed God first in our lives?

## *Traffic: What's driving your life?*

### *Discussion Guide 4*

#### **Mark 4.1-20; 10.17-22**

#### **Getting Started: 10 minutes**

- When have you ever felt stifled or suffocated? Can you elaborate?

**Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes** *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

**Setting the Stage:** *Wealth. Money. Fame. Fortune. Let's be honest. Who hasn't dreamed of having it all? Who hasn't dreamed of hitting the jackpot, winning the lottery, or getting a huge inheritance? I don't know anyone who hasn't wondered what it would feel like to get a big fat check, and I am not talking just about the ones from Publisher's Clearinghouse. Something, deep down seems to drive us toward obtaining, gaining, getting more. Wealth allures us. When we get it, even the slightest bit, we strive for more. The desire is so ingrained in us that we have built our whole economic system around it, the foundation and fabric of our very society. Our entire economic system rises and falls upon the desire to make and build wealth. It feels good, seems right. So if it feels so good, seems so right, why does Jesus seem to say that it is so wrong? What's wrong with wealth, really? Actually, nothing is wrong with wealth, only the place we give it in our lives and the way we use it. According to Jesus, wealth slowly chokes us, strangles the life out of us, the life out of our faith. That makes me wonder. When was the last time any of us breathed?*

- Read Mark 4.7, 18-19
- Jesus said that a pursuit of wealth could choke out spiritual growth in one's life. What is your immediate and honest reaction to Jesus' words? Can you elaborate?
- Read Mark 10.17-22
- In this scene, how do you see wealth choking faith?
- How might this scene look today?
- How important is the pursuit of wealth to you, really? (Consider personalizing Jesus' response in Mark 10.21.)
- How might wealth be competing with faith in your life?
- Using the background information on wealth, evaluate your own life. How might an understanding that wealth comes from God and that it is to be used to do good and bless others encourage faith?
- What, if anything, might have to change in your life for you to have a proper relationship between wealth and faith?
- Are you willing to consider allowing God to make these changes? Can you elaborate?

#### **Wrapping Up: 20 minutes**

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)