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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 23 (Pentecost 20), Series B
Saturday, October 9th, 2021
Sunday, October 10th, 2021

Sermon: “What Must I Do...?”

Text: Mark 10:17-22

Focus: Jesus Christ rescues us from idolatry so that we may be saved.

Function: That they would put all their confidence in Christ for salvation.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person...” (SC, 2nd Article of Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. “And as [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Mark 10:17, ESV).¹

Who is this person?

Mark doesn’t tell us very much about the man’s identity. Matthew tells us that he was young (Matt. 19:22). Luke tells us straight away that he was a “ruler” (Luke 19:18), perhaps the presider at his local synagogue (Greek: *archōn*). We usually refer to this story as Jesus’ encounter with the rich, young ruler.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

The rich, young ruler was a sincere man. He did not come to test Jesus or to catch him at his words, as the Pharisees so often did. That this man came in earnest is evidenced by his great humility. He *ran* to Jesus—something that wealthy men of station never did in the Middle East. And he *knelt* before him. He bowed before him, acknowledging Jesus to be his master. And then he asked his question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17).

What a powerful question! “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” What must *I* do to be saved? Nothing is more important than our eternal destiny. Will our eternal address be heaven or hell? How do we get there? What must we do?

What must we do to inherit eternal life? Alfred Edersheim, who was an Anglican priest and convert from Judaism, says that it was a common question with which the Jewish rabbis wrestled: what must I do to inherit eternal life? All of the answers came back to observance of the Law. But in fact, it is the *wrong* question. “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” We cannot do *anything*! You do not earn an inheritance.

You cannot win it with a lottery ticket. You cannot buy it. You can only receive it as a gift.

Christianity is not a religion of rules and regulations that must be observed, kept, and followed. Christianity is about the gift of faith that clings to the cross of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Jesus answers the young man with unnerving irony. “Why do you call *me* good? No one is good except God alone” (v. 18). This answer troubles some people. They wonder if, perhaps, Jesus is setting aside any claim to divinity. Not at all! In fact, quite the opposite. What he is doing is taking the young man’s words quite literally and flinging them back in his face, as if to say, “Careful, now. Do you know with whom you speak? You call me ‘good,’ but only God is good. Are you willing to take the step of faith to believe and call me Lord and God?”

Jesus hints as much in his listing of the Ten Commandments. Or rather, only the second table of the Law. Jesus only lists commandments

that deal with our horizontal relationships with other people: our parents, spouse, and neighbors. Yet he makes no mention of the Ninth and Tenth Commandments against coveting (which, we will discover, are part of the man's main problem). Even more strikingly, Jesus entirely leaves off the first table of the Law, the first three commandments dealing with our vertical relationship with *God*. "You shall have no other gods." "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God." "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy."

Even though the rich man asks the wrong question, Jesus gives him an answer. It is the right answer to the wrong question. But something is missing in Jesus' reply. *Much* is missing. The commandments against idolatry and coveting are entirely left out. In fact, coveting *is* idolatry (cf. Col. 3:5). Unfortunately, the young man doesn't pick up on what Jesus is laying down.

"Teacher," he boasts, "all these I have kept from my youth" (v. 20).

Really, Mister? You've kept *all* these Commandments? Forget for a moment Commandments 1 through 3, 9, and 10. Just look at the other 5. You've *always* honored your father and mother? You never talked

back to them or shouted out in anger? You always did what they asked? You never disobeyed them? And what about the fifth commandment against murder: even if you have never stabbed someone with a knife, haven't you stabbed them in the back by your words—or wished that they were dead? What about the sixth commandment against adultery: have you never lusted after a woman in your heart and entertained shameful actions in your dreams? What about the seventh commandment against stealing: even if you have never outright purloined another's property, have you ever been slack or lazy at work, thereby cheating your employer of your fair pay? Have you never taken credit for another person's work or cheated on a test or quiz at school? And then there is the eighth commandment, perhaps most difficult of all! Have you never told a lie—not even a “little,” white lie—or exaggerated a little bit about your accomplishments to impress others? Have you never gossiped or slandered a brother, sister, neighbor, or friend? If so, then well and good. You and Jesus are the only perfect people ever to have lived. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Yet even if the rich, young, man could not see the poverty of soul, Jesus could (and does with us). Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and “loved him” (v. 21). What a powerful, simple statement of God’s love for poor sinners. Even though this rich, young man had no lack of food, clothing, or creature comforts, his *soul* was in the most desperate need of all.

So Jesus told him, “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).

Now, throughout the history of the Church, this Gospel lesson has sometimes been wrongly used to suggest that voluntary poverty is necessary for salvation. Passages like this and others are behind the vows of poverty made by some orders of monks and nuns since the Middle Ages.

But God doesn’t require his people to be poor. And he doesn’t hate the rich. Jesus *loved* the rich, young, man. But because he loved him, he needed to pry his idols out of his hands. In the Small Catechism, we confess that “we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

But this man feared, loved, and trusted in his wealth above all things.

“He had great possessions” (Mark 10:22). Or perhaps his possessions possessed him. “For where your heart is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).

In the Large Catechism, Luther writes that whatever we trust in with our whole heart is truly our god. Whatever we look to for all help and refuge in time of need is the real object of our worship. Some people have the right God and look to Jesus for every help and comfort. They call upon the name of the Lord in their time of trouble, and they flee to the Lord as to a mighty fortress. But most people have another god—the wrong god. They look to money, power, sex, the government, Allah, Buddha, or the Virgin Mary as the solution to all their problems. They push Christ off the throne of their hearts and put an idol in his stead. And as long as we worship idols, we will never be saved.

Some of you may be wondering, “Pastor, do *I* need to sell everything I have and give it to the poor?” The answer: *maybe*. It depends on the condition of your heart. If money, wealth, fancy cars and clothes, or a big house is your idol, then perhaps you *do* need to sell it

and give everything away to the poor. Learn to depend upon God instead of yourself. We must clear out the idols cluttering the closets of our hearts. We must dethrone and destroy every idol that keeps us from Christ.

Christ must be King on the throne of our hearts. “Come, follow me,” he said to the rich, young man—the very same call of discipleship with which he beckons you and me (cf. 1:17; 8:34).

But the rich, young ruler would not follow Jesus. Instead, his face clouded over with sorrow and sadness. “Disheartened by [Jesus’] saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (v. 22). He did not own his wealth. His wealth owned him. Wealth and riches make for a terrible master. As Jesus says, nobody can serve God and money (Matt. 6:24).

That is why if our money, wealth, status, or power holds sway over our hearts, then we must be rid of them. We must fear, love, and trust in God above all things, or else all things will destroy our lives.

So what must we do to inherit eternal life—to be saved? In answer, Jesus looks down on you with arms outstretched on the cross

and says, “My child, you do not need to do anything in order to be saved. My forgiveness is a free gift. I bought your inheritance in heaven by shedding my blood. I have done everything necessary for your salvation. There is nothing left for you to do. It is finished.” The Bible says: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). In the spiritual life, everything without Jesus means nothing. But Jesus plus nothing equals everything. Jesus is enough. He is the answer. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.