

"The Would-Be Slam-Dunk Disciple"

Mark 10:17-30

October 14, 2018

I. The Rich Young Man and the Disciples

"Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

The words come from a slightly breathless man who obviously has it all together. He is young and vastly wealthy, so the text tells us. The fact that he's concerned about his salvation tells us that he's wise.

The fact that he's come running to Jesus to ask the question tells us that this is a zealous man who wants to follow the Lord. To the disciples and others gathered around, this is an excellent prospect for a follower. I mean, they wish that everyone would follow Jesus, of course; but this is the kind of guy who's got his act together. He's the kind of guy who would volunteer to serve on committees and get a lot of work done. He's the kind of guy who would be an asset for whatever sort of plan or strategy needs to be launched. And it looks like he's already in; despite his cool confidence, he's actually run to where Jesus is at and knelt before him. The disciples must be breathing a sigh of relief, for it's been a rough several weeks.

First there was the fiasco after the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, when many disciples left. Then there have been these strange, discomfiting predictions by Jesus that He's going to be crucified. But here's a nice change: A young, rich, intelligent guy has appeared, who wants to be a disciple. This man is a slam dunk for adult confirmation.

But the conversation doesn't go the way it's supposed to. At least, it doesn't go the way the disciples think it's supposed to... Who would ever imagine that this slam-dunk disciple would walk away sorrowful a few minutes later?

What happens? Let's examine the exchange:

"Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" asks the rich young man. The problem has already begun, because the question he asks is flawed. Listen again: "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" The question tells us that man assumes that he can work his way into heaven by the things that he does. What he is asking Jesus is this: "How much more of God's Law do I have to keep in order to earn my way into eternal life?-What do I have to do?" Although the man is sincere, he is far from faith: He doesn't want Jesus to save him from sin, but to approve of who he is and the good that he has done.

Since the man asks a question about keeping the commandments, Jesus gives him an answer about keeping the commandments: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and mother.'" In other words, since the man asks, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?", Jesus says, "You shall keep God's commandments," and the Lord proceeds to give him a sampling of the Ten.

But this preaching of the Law only leaves the man smug: Is this all there is to it? He's nearly home free already! What good news! And so he exults, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth!" Yup. This guy is the slam-dunk disciple. Isn't he?

But then the bomb drops. Jesus, who loves this man, preaches one more bit of Law: "One thing you lack," says the Lord. "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

This time, the man sees how the Law accuses him, and it crushes him. Jesus has just pointed out to him his sin. But what sin is that, exactly?

The sin our Lord condemns here is not wealth; Jesus is not preaching a sermon against the evils of being rich. We must make this clear so that we can understand the true sin and the marvelous Gospel of this text. Bible stories like this one have been used to declare that wealth is innately sinful; therefore, for instance, in Luther's time it was considered a great work to sell everything you owned and make a vow of poverty, for poverty was considered to be more pleasing to God. But this is not what the Lord is saying. Granted, wealth has its dangers, as the Lord will go on to say: Those who have riches are tempted to trust in those riches instead of the Lord.

So, is the sin greed? There is greed here, yes. The man has much in the way of riches, and he would rather keep them than love his neighbor and give them to the poor. So, yes, there is greed at play here, but the greed is not the big problem here: There is a far more dangerous sin at work.

The greater sin is this: The man thinks that he can save himself by how well he works at keeping God's commands. He believes that he can work his way into heaven by being good enough. When Jesus lists several commands, the man is delighted because he can tick them off and say, "I've kept them! I'm on track!" But then the Lord says, "If you are so virtuous that you can keep all of God's commandments, then you won't be in love with your money; you'll be able to give it all away. If you're going to save yourself by your work, then prove it."

Thus, the Lord shows to the man that he suffers from greed, though he didn't know it until that moment; and because he suffers the sin of greed, he isn't keeping all of God's commands and he can't earn eternal life. For greed, the man can be forgiven as he trusts in Jesus, the Savior. But as long as the man believes that he can save himself, he does not trust in Jesus to save him; thus there is no forgiveness. The Lord shoots down his whole plan of salvation.

But listen carefully to the Lord's words again: He preaches the Law, yes, in order to show the man that he cannot save himself; so He tells the man to sell all that he has. But the Lord does so in order that the man might be saved; therefore Jesus preaches the Gospel, saying "Come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

In other words, Jesus says to the man: "You can't save yourself. But I can. I will save you by going to the cross and dying for your sin. Do not trust in your own efforts, but in mine. I will share my cross with you, so that you do not have to suffer and die for your sin. You can't save yourself. But I can."

Thus the Lord declares to this man the Gospel, telling him that He will bear the cross for him. But it's too much for the man and his preconceived notions. He arrived expecting the Lord's blessing for his keeping of the law-and perhaps for his well-run life and wealth; instead, he's told to throw it all away and trust in the cross instead. This is not the way he wants salvation, and this is not the way he wants the Savior to be. Therefore, he walks away.

The would-be disciple, the one who was supposed to be a slam-dunk, the guy who had everything going his way, walks away.

And Jesus lets him go. One can even imagine the frowns of disapproval by some gathered around, that Jesus would drive away such a prospect with His teaching. But Jesus lets him go. He loves the man, but in love He will not force the man to be repentant. He will, however, go to the cross and die for the sins of the rich young man; if, later on, the man repents of his sin, the benefits of the cross will be there for him.

The man walks away, and the disciples now demonstrate their distinctive ability to completely miss the point. For in the verses following our text Jesus begins to explain: "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" Not because riches are inherently sinful, but because those who have wealth see little need for a Savior. Wealth is an easy thing to trust in, and those who trust in wealth aren't trusting in Christ.

And so Jesus says, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples are astonished. The would-be slam-dunk disciple had everything going for him. If he can't get into heaven, who can?

Jesus expands: "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And once again the disciples are astonished: If those who have so much going for them can't get into heaven, "Who then can be saved?"

And so, to the disciples the Lord preaches a one-sentence sermon of Law and Gospel once again:

"With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible." The Law: You can't. You can't save yourself. The Gospel: God can. He can save you because His Son is going to the cross.

II. You Can't. He Has.

The message remains the same: You can't save you. He has saved you. Unfortunately, because we sinful human beings keep asking the wrong question, we keep coming up with the wrong answer.

Sometimes the question is as crystal clear as that of the rich young man in the text: "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Right away, we're saying that there must be something we can do.

But sadly, even though the question is wrong, there are plenty who will be happy to give you an answer. A wrong answer.

In more than one church, the answer is that you must do good works in order to inherit eternal life. Keep all the commandments, at least as well as you can, and the Lord will graciously open the gates of heaven. This is a popular doctrine among individuals: As long as I belong to and/or attend church at least x number of times per year, I've done enough and eternal life is mine. As long as I do my best each day, what more can God ask for? But this is hardly confined to the church; this is the theology of the world: Do your best, do right by other people, and heaven is yours. (When one prominent baseball announcer died, a tearful fan announced on national radio that God had to let him into heaven because he had called the team's games so well.)

The answer is appealing to our sinful nature-it means that we can do this on our own. But if thought through, it's not a good answer at all.

How much is enough? How many good works must you do in order to inherit eternal life? Can you do enough good works? The answer: No. You can't.

Sometimes the question is more subtle: "Now that Jesus has saved me, what must I do to keep that salvation?" This starts out well-it credits Jesus with our salvation. But it goes on to assume that we build our faith and keep our salvation by the works that we do. Hence, many a church will teach, "Now that you are saved, you can be sure you've maintained your salvation if you help others." Or,

"Now that you are a Christian, you can be sure you are saved as long as you're improving." Or, "Now that you are a Christian, you can be sure you are saved as long as you feel better than you did before." Now, let us be clear: Is it wrong to help others? Is it wrong to improve on some behaviors and habits? Is it wrong to feel better? No. But nor do any of these things cause God to love us or save us.

If we believe that God loves us now because of these things, then we are saying God loves us for these things instead of Christ. Is this right? No. Can you build your faith and maintain your salvation by your works? No. You can't.

Whenever we ask, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?", the answer from the Lord is this: "You can't. 'With men it is impossible...'"

"...But not with God; for with God all things are possible."

There is an answer and there is salvation, but it's an answer to a different question. The question is not "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" The question is, "What has the Lord done to give me eternal life?" And to such a question there is Good News in abundance.

What has the Lord done? Look to the Good Teacher in the text for this day. You may be familiar with the sly comment, "Those who can't, teach"? That's not the case here. The Good Teacher taught, and He did. All those commandments that He listed for the rich young man, He kept.

Perfectly. He kept all of God's Law, without a sin. Did He give all that He had to the poor? Yes: He gave all that He had-not just for the poor, but for all people. He offered His back to those who scourged Him, His scalp to those who crowned Him with thorns. He allowed His hands, feet and side to be pierced for this sinful world. Did He give all? Yes, in a depth that we cannot even begin to contemplate. Unlike the rich young man, did He take up the cross? Yes. He took up the cross. And on that cross He died for the sins of the world. That is what the Lord has done.

You can't. So He has.

But He is not finished. The Good Teacher now offers that cross to you. By His holy Law preached to you this day, He still warns and accuses of sin-not so that you walk away sorrowful, but so that you might repent and turn away from that which would destroy you. And by His holy Gospel, He gives you His cross. He takes away your sins-you need not suffer and die for them because He already has.

He gives you His righteousness, giving you the credit and benefits of His perfect keeping of God's Law. He makes you His family, members of His household. He has marked you with His cross in Holy Baptism, that He might join you to His death. He gives you His body and blood in Holy Communion, that He might join you to His life.

You can't. He can; and He does. Faithfully, again and again granting you forgiveness for your sins.

This is the Good News He has for us-that He has won salvation for us and gives it freely. And this is the message that He calls us to proclaim as a Church-continually, faithfully. At times, people will hear and walk away-even some as attractive and "with-it" as the rich young ruler. We watch such go with sorrow, praying that they will return to the grace of God. And we continue to preach the same life-giving Gospel which our Lord proclaimed and fulfilled: You are sure of your salvation: Not because you can earn it, but because He has won it for you by His death and resurrection.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen