

The 21st Sunday after Pentecost
October 17, 2021
Proper 24

The Lessons: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20
 Psalm 119:9-16
 Hebrews 4:1-13
 Mark 10:23-31

The Hymns: # 782 *Gracious God, You Send Great Blessings*
 # 654 *Your Kingdom, O God, Is My Glorious Treasure*
 # 730 *What Is the World to Me?*

The Collect: O Lord, almighty and everlasting God, You have commanded us to pray and have promised to hear us. Mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may direct and govern our hearts in all things that we may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 The Right Stuff
 Mark 10:23-31

“They were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.’”

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

The Right Stuff was a 1983 movie depicting the heroes of the United States space program. It depicted the drive, the ambition and courage of the test pilots and astronauts who would lead the way into space. In the film’s view, these men had “the right stuff” for advancing the world into the space age. As Christians, we need to know and have the right stuff for living in the Kingdom of God.

In Mark chapter 10, from where our text is taken, our Lord is teaching us where our priorities are to be. In the verses just prior to our text, we hear about a rich young man who wanted to inherit eternal life. He kept the Law; that is, he obeyed the Ten Commandments—at least in his own mind he did. But when Jesus told him to sell his possessions and follow Him, the man turned away sadly because he had great wealth. He loved his possessions. He feared, loved, and trusted in them above God. He might have outwardly kept the second table of the Law. He hadn’t murdered or stole or committed adultery. He honored his parents. He says that from his youth he has kept all the commandments.

However, he was guilty of breaking the very First Commandment, whether he chose to realize it or not. His heart was not in the right place. He relied on his great wealth for his happiness rather than on the Lord for his salvation.

After the man left, Jesus reiterated to His disciples how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples were incredulous. They believed, along with most people of that time, that if anyone should gain eternal life, it would be the wealthy. God had already blessed them in this life, so surely they would be blessed in the life to come.

At issue here is not possessions in and of themselves; the issue is the priority we place upon them. How important are the things we own and the money we have, and are we willing to leave these behind for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the Gospel? Our Lord calls us to follow Him, even to the point of even being willing to leave behind what we own and the people we love because we are to love Him more than all of these. True discipleship to Christ demands total commitment to Him on our part.

All that we have and everything we own does not belong to us. These all belong to God. In fact, we do not own anything. God has given all these worldly gifts to us, as Martin Luther teaches us in his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life."

We are the stewards of what God has given us. He is the Creator, and we are His creation. Yes, we are to thank God for giving us each day our daily bread...and pray that He continues to do so. We also need to be mindful of what the Lord has given us, lest we go to extremes in misusing what God has given us. The ancient Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, writes:

"Let this teach the **prosperous** that they are not to neglect their own salvation, as if they had been already foredoomed, nor, on the other hand, to cast wealth into the sea, or condemn it as a traitor and an enemy to life, but learn in what way and how to use wealth and obtain life."

Material possessions can exist in the life of the Christian, being good stewards of what God has given us here on earth, using these things to His glory. Clement goes on to write:

"The Savior by no means has excluded the rich on account of wealth itself, and the possession of property, nor fenced off salvation against them, if they are able and willing to submit their life to God's commandments, and prefer them to transitory things. Let them look to the Lord with steady eye...If one is able in the midst of wealth to turn from its mystique, to entertain moderate desires, to exercise self-control, to seek God alone, and to breathe God and walk with God, such a man submits to the commandments, being free, unsubdued, free of disease, unwounded by wealth. But if not, "sooner shall a camel enter through a needle's eye, than such a rich man reach the kingdom of God."
[Salvation of the Rich Man 26]

You see, there is an even greater gift that our Lord has given us, the gift of faith, for without faith in Christ it is impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven. Trust in material things rather than in the blood of the Messiah is a recipe for certain condemnation. Things come and things go. A dear, sweet lady in one of our congregations put this in the proper perspective. She said, "It's just stuff."

All our stuff is ... just that -- stuff. Heaven and earth will pass away, and all the stuff therein. But God's Word will not pass away, and that is the right stuff.

How sad it is when we fix our eyes on what we see, the things around us, and not on what is unseen: heaven and the eternal life there for all who believe in Jesus Christ and follow Him alone. We make mountains out of the molehills of our material goods and ignore the mountain on which our Lord died. We pore over our bank statements; yet we do not remember and live our Baptism. We go to great lengths to have a hearty and healthy supper at home; yet we dismiss the forgiveness and free grace found in the Lord's Supper here in the Lord's house as something we merely "do" in the liturgy. We go to great lengths to save for our retirement; yet we starve our faith.

We forget the words of Abraham, when his son Isaac asked him where the lamb for the sacrifice was. Abraham said, "God Himself will provide the lamb." God did provide the lamb for Abraham's sacrifice, just as He provided the Lamb for the sacrifice on our behalf; yet we forget God's promises and stray like sheep without a shepherd. God has given us all that we need to support our bodies and lives; yet we fail to thank God for what He has given us, and we fail to ask for His protection that we may hold on to, and be good stewards of what He has entrusted to us. This so-called spirit of independence, of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps or conquering our fears may work for test pilots and astronauts, but it works against us where our faith is concerned because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to Him.

While it is impossible for us to make the effort or the decision to believe in Christ the Lord, it is not impossible for God to bring us to faith in Him. All things are possible with Him. And it is God's desire that all people be saved. To this end the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps us in the one true faith, for Christ has redeemed us, lost and condemned people, purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.

The work of God is to believe in the One whom He sent, as Jesus tells us in St. John's Gospel. It is God's work to bring us to saving faith in Jesus Christ. This faith is a gift from Him, so that our boasting may not be of ourselves but of the riches of God's grace. You are rich, rich in the forgiveness of sins won on the cross by your dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. You are rich, rich in the gifts of His grace He offers to you through His Word and Sacraments. You are rich, even though you may not have much money, even if all you are able to give to the Lord is a widow's mite, because God has given you the greatest gifts of all. He gives you the forgiveness of all your sins. He gives you the promise of eternal life in heaven through your God-given faith in Jesus Christ. He gives you salvation in the Name of Jesus Christ unto life everlasting. We have nothing greater than these gifts that only the Lord can give to us. Even if we lose our earthly possessions, it does not matter, for God Himself will provide us with a way out from underneath our burdens. Our stuff is just stuff, it will come and it will go. But the stuff given to us by God is eternal!

The Holy Spirit fixes our eyes on what is unseen: eternal life in heaven with our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let the bank take the car and the people buy our stuff at auction, for, as we sing in the great Reformation hymn: "The Word they still shall let remain / Nor any thanks have for it; He's by our side upon the plain / With His good gifts and Spirit. And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won; The Kingdom ours remaineth".

You have the "Right Stuff" only in Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God! In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.