

Sermon – 10/17/21

Text – Mark 10:23-31

Theme – “Who Can Be Saved?”

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

It is important for us to note that today’s Gospel lesson is the sequel to last week’s reading. You will remember that as Jesus was setting out on His last journey – to Jerusalem and the cross – He was approached by a rich young man. The man knelt in the dust of the road and asked Jesus: “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Because the man asks a Law question – “*What must **I** do...*” – Jesus gives him a Law answer: follow the commandments. That is, if a person thinks he can work his own way into heaven, then he must be made to come face-to-face with the enormity of the Law’s demands. Be **perfect**, the Law says. All the time. To all people. In all things. In your every thought, word, and deed. Do **that** and you will live.

But you can’t. No one but Christ can. However, this rich young man still tried to justify himself. He tells Jesus that he *has* kept all the commandments, ever since childhood. So, Jesus gives him one last bit of Law. A piece too tough for him to chew and swallow. He says to the young man: “*Sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Me.*” Finally, the rich young man sees the truth. He cannot do that. He has vast wealth and possessions. And he loves them too much to give them up, let alone give them away. And so he departed from his interview with Jesus sad and sorrowful. That is what trying to live under the Law does. It gives no hope, no life, no salvation. Just the bitter realization of sin and the utter futility and impossibility of ever meeting its demands.

And that is where today’s reading picks up. The rich young man has turned and walked away. And Jesus looks to the Twelve and says: “*How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to*

*enter the Kingdom of God!*” The disciples are rather stunned. They don’t get it either. Like the rich young man, they had wrong ideas about the Law, and about wealth (as we will soon see). They thought to themselves: How could Jesus have treated this nice young man so? Didn’t Jesus get that this was exactly the type of man they were hoping to persuade to follow Jesus? He was rich. He was young. He was important. He was moral and upstanding and well-respected. Why did Jesus burst the young man’s balloon?

Jesus knows what is in their hearts and minds (He *is* God, after all). So, He expands upon His words, saying: “*Children, how difficult it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*” Note the subtle change there from His first sentence to His second. First, Jesus speaks of how hard it is in general to enter the Kingdom of God – not just for the rich but for anyone. And He then again uses the rich as His example. But it is vital to recognize that the difficulty in entering the Kingdom of God is not just for the rich, but for all people.

In fact, it is not just **difficult** – it is actually impossible. “*It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle...*” Now, I remember hearing a preacher once say that Jesus did not mean getting a camel through the eye of an actual needle, but that there was this small and narrow and short gate in Jerusalem that they called “the Needle’s Eye” because of its tiny size. And that Jesus was really saying that just as it was a struggle to get a camel through it, so it is for us to make ourselves obey the Law. But, that preacher said, if the camel driver forced his beast down on its knees and got it to crawl through, it would make it. So, he said, it is with us. If we but humble ourselves, if we get down on our knees before God, if we make ourselves work really hard, then we can get through that “Needle’s Eye” of the Law and do what God wants.

Well, that preacher was all wet. He was dead wrong. He was totally misreading Jesus and His point. It is not about the Law! You cannot ever measure up to it. No matter how much you try. No matter how much you humble yourself and get down on your knees. No matter how hard you work. You will fail. You will sin. Because you are a sinner. You were a sinner when your mother conceived you in her womb. You were a sinner when you were born. You have been a sinner every day since. You will be a sinner until the day you die. And no amount of struggling and working and trying is ever going to change that.

The disciples, in exasperation and fear, ask: “*Who then CAN be saved?*” Jesus answers: “*With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.*” With man it is impossible, meaning that if we look to the Law then we are lost. But if we look to God – to the Gospel – then it suddenly becomes not only possible, but even a done deal.

The Gospel tells us that God has saved us. God — not you, not me. Not our works. Not our obedience. Not our humbling and struggling and trying. Not our love. Not our **anything**. God saves us. He has come down from heaven and become Man for us. He has shouldered our burden of the Law and kept each and every commandment – perfectly and all the time – for us. He has picked up our load of sin and carried it to the cross, where He suffered and paid the full price for all those sins. He has endured hell for us. He rose on the third day to make this clear and sure and certain.

So, what must **I** do to inherit eternal life? Nothing, for Jesus has done it all for you. It is a gift of His love, given to you freely and without any cost to you. That is the goal of His journey to Jerusalem and the cross, the journey He was about to undertake when that rich young man asked his question. The journey He made to rescue you from sin/death/devil. The journey He made to take that burden from you and, in exchange, to give you freedom and peace and security.

You see, it is always about Jesus. Always. And whenever we forget that, we need to have our attention turned back to Him. For it is only when we plead Christ (and Him crucified) for us that we have hope. With man it is indeed impossible. But with God – with **Christ** – it is not just possible, it is **finished**. Just as Jesus Himself said at the cross. (pause)

Yet all that seems to go right by Peter and the other disciples. For immediately after Jesus steers them away from their own efforts and back to God -- back to the Gospel -- Peter pipes up and says: “*See, we have left everything and followed You.*” Fixated on the Law, stuck on earning his way into God’s favor, Peter seizes upon Jesus’ words to the rich young man (about selling everything and following Him) and Peter proudly says he has done just that. As have the rest of the Twelve. “Look at us, Jesus. **We** are good enough, right?”

How disappointed Jesus must have been. But He replies by telling Peter that, yes, those who put the Gospel ahead of all (including family and possessions and everything else) WILL be rewarded. In this life, they will be rewarded with persecution and hatred. But in the age to come, rewarded with eternal life. However, Jesus closes His comments by saying: “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*” The Gospel turns everything upside down and inside out. Those who seem to be the holiest and best may not be. And those who seem to be the most common and ordinary might be those who are first in God’s eyes. For it is not the outward works that God notes, but the heart. Where is your trust? Where is your faith? Where is your hope? If it is anywhere but Christ, then you are indeed last – outside even. But if it is in Christ alone, then you have all the riches of heaven as your own – God promises it. And He never fails to deliver. (pause)

So, with all of that in mind, let us go to some of our own questions about wealth and possessions. Questions about why God gives them to certain folks, and not to others. Questions about how riches relate to salvation and Christianity and God’s favor.

First, we need to point out that wealth is a gift from God. But like any other gift (such as musical ability or intelligence or physical strength) it is NOT a sign of God's special favor or disfavor. That is, the wealthy are not more loved by God than the poor. They are not better. Nor are the rich more evil, or greedy, or hard-hearted. Wealth neither makes a person good nor bad.

And just like with the other gifts God gives, He has expectations on how we use that wealth. That is, God would have us use these gifts in His service and to help our neighbor. So the problem with wealth comes when it stops being a gift — a tool — to be used in service to God and others, but instead becomes a goal in and of itself. When it becomes a false god that we worship and trust. When it becomes the master, and we its servants. When it leads us to become greedy and selfish, instead of generous and giving.

As I said, it is no sin to be wealthy. Just as it is no proof of righteousness to be poor. No, a poor man with no land, no money in the bank, no resources can be just as greedy, just as selfish, just as clutching and idolatrous of money as any rich man. Where is your trust? Remember how Luther explains it: a god is that to which we turn in times of trouble, that which we worship and love above all things. And anyone – rich or poor – can be tempted to make wealth into a god.

That rich young man who came to Jesus saw that he had made his vast wealth into a god. It was that which he trusted and loved. So when Jesus told him to sell all his goods and give the money away, he could not. It was too dear to him. Too precious. Too important.

Now, I'm sure we would be quick to say that money is not our god, that we love and trust the Lord first and foremost. But do we really? When we look to future, do we trust our savings and retirement funds – and only then to God, as sort of an afterthought? When we prioritize our budgets, do we put our church offerings first – or do they fall somewhere else on the list? Do we give generously –

and cheerfully – to those in need? Do we see our financial resources as OURS; or do we see them as God's, which He has only entrusted to us to use – with an accounting to Him?

No, if we are honest with ourselves we will have to admit that we have failed in how we have handled the wealth that God has given us. We have loved it. We have trusted in it. We have hoarded it. We have worshipped and served it.

We have misused that gift of the Lord's, just as we have misused and abused ALL His gifts to us: our families, our bodies, our work, our time, and so on. We have done so because, as I said earlier, we are sinners. The Law smacks us upside the head again, doesn't it? We have all failed, miserably.

So, who then can be saved? Well, with man it is impossible. But not so with God. That is, don't look to the Law but look to the Gospel! Don't trust in your own works, your own efforts, your own goodness (because it is never enough). Instead, trust in Christ crucified. He who was infinitely rich became poor, so that we might be made truly rich with the treasures of heaven. What is His is yours, as a gift. Trust in Him!

And then live that faith. Recognize what God has given you – in earthly and spiritual gifts – and use them as He desires. Share them. Generously. To serve God and to help your neighbor. And remember, you will never run out — for He will never run out. There is always more in God's storehouse. And He will keep you satisfied and full in Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Nicene Creed  
FE – Offertory/Offering