

Sermon – 10/10/21

Text – Mark 10:17-22

Theme – “What Must I Do?”

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

It’s October, and for us Lutherans that means it’s Reformation month. And that means it’s time to hear more about Martin Luther. As I have said in previous sermons, Luther wore many hats before and during the Reformation. He was a professor at the university in Wittenberg. He was a priest who served in the town church. He was a writer and scholar of international renown. He was a famous preacher. He was advisor to politicians and princes. But, if you would have asked him (especially in his younger days), he would have told that, above all else, he was a *monk*. An Augustinian Hermit, in fact – one of the more strict orders of the day. At that time, a monk was thought to be on the fast track to heaven because he had given up so much for God: he had taken the vows of poverty and chastity and obedience; he had given up contact with the world and its pleasures; he had surrounded himself with “holy” things; his days were devoted to prayer and worship and good works. To be a monk was thought to be a guarantee that God would be favorable and gracious to that person.

Now, of course, we all know the rest of the story: we know that Luther, after study of the Scripture, discovered that such thinking was all wrong. He came to see that we are saved – not by what *we* do – but only by what Christ has done for us. We’ll talk more of that discovery in a few weeks, when we get to Reformation Sunday. But I wanted to remind you of all that because it *does* fit in so well with our Gospel lesson today, where St. Mark writes:

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?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘*Do not murder; Do not commit adultery,*

Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.” And he said to (Jesus), “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to 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.” Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

The monks of Luther’s time knew this passage so very well. In fact, it was one of the citations they gave to prove that they were doing what God had commanded. And on the face of it, they seem to be right. Jesus certainly DID tell the rich man to sell all that he had, to give the money to the poor, and to then follow after Him. But is that the point that Jesus was really trying to make? Did Jesus mean for us to think that if we sold all our possessions, if we gave it all away, if we left our homes and families and work and everything else behind, and then spent the rest of our days traipsing across the countryside in imitation of Christ --- that if we did all of those things, then we would **deserve** eternal life? (pause)

Note that the question posed to Jesus by the rich man was “*What must **I** do to inherit eternal life?*” The rich man’s assumption was that somehow he COULD get himself into heaven, that he could do whatever it took to bring himself to eternal life – all he needed was for Jesus to point him in the right direction, and then he would do the rest.

And so, Jesus responds in a most interesting way. He says absolutely nothing about God’s grace. Nothing about the Son of God coming to save fallen mankind. Nothing about faith in Him. No. Jesus just asks him: “*What do the commandments say?*” The rich man wants to live by the Law, not the Gospel, and so Jesus points him right back to the Law, just as the man had asked.

But (and this is the thing that always gets me) the rich man comes back: “*Teacher, all this I have kept since I was a boy!*” What an amazing ego! What an inflated opinion of himself and his holiness! What a self-righteous Pharisee he was! He actually and truly thought that he HAD kept the Law, that he had NOT sinned. And ALL the time since his childhood!

Now, you and I might have tried to point out to the man that he HAD sinned. We might have gotten upset and called him a liar. We might have gotten into a shouting match with him, trying to prove he was wrong. But not Jesus. In effect, He simply says to the man (in great love, as St. Mark tells us): “OK, if you *have* kept all the commandments, then do this one simple, easy, little thing: sell all your possessions and give it all away. Then come and follow Me.” In that one little sentence, Jesus lays bare the man’s sin. He destroys the man’s self-conception of perfection. He forces the man to come face-to-face with the fact that he loves his wealth more than he loves God, more than he loves his neighbor. And that realization knocked out the self-righteous ground right out from beneath the rich man’s feet. Because that is what the Law does.

You see, Jesus’ point in this passage is NOT to give us some new commandment to follow, but rather He is trying to show us that we do not (and cannot) keep the Law. He wants us to see ourselves as does God: as sinners in desperate need of His grace. He wants us to see the rich man’s original question (“*What must I do...?*”) requires the answer of “nothing”. That is, there is nothing we must do – nothing we CAN do – to inherit eternal life. The way of the Law (for that is what we are dealing with whenever we talk about what we do for salvation) only leads to failure, to disappointment, to sorrow, to hell.

We are all so stained and polluted and corrupted by our sinful nature that we cannot save ourselves. That is why Jesus came: to be the Savior that we cannot be for ourselves. To keep the commandments that the rich man (and we) could not. To suffer the full price for our sins – the hell of the cross – in our place. To die the death we merit. In short, Jesus answers as He did because He wanted that man to see there is no hope in the Law, but only in the Gospel. Only in Christ for us – in life and in death. (pause)

Whenever anyone asks that Law-based question – “What must I do?” we need to remember how Jesus began His answer: “*No one is good except God alone.*” And so our salvation is only in Him. Of

course, we all *know* that. We all are quick to give that Lutheran answer: we are saved only by God's grace, through faith in Christ Jesus, by the working of the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament.

And yet so often that is NOT the way that we live. We think of all that we imagine that we have done for God – the time sacrificed for Him; the money given to Him; the services performed for Him; the devotion and praises offered to Him. Or we think of all we have done for our neighbor: how we have helped others; how we have been kind to them; how we have gone out of our way for them. And, we tell ourselves, surely all that MUST count for something with God. Certainly God will take all that into consideration when He determines who will inherit eternal life.

But, you see, that's the very same attitude we find in our lesson today from the rich man. The same attitude condemned in the Pharisees. The same attitude that drove the monks in Luther's day. We all like to think that we somehow DO bring something to God – some good work – that will aid in our salvation.

But we do not. "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Well, unless you are perfect, unless you have kept every single commandment in thought and word and deed ALL the time, then the answer is simple: Nothing. There is nothing you can do to inherit eternal life. But the Good News is that Jesus has done it ALL for you. And gives it all to you as gift of His love.

The work of salvation is all passive on our part – we do nothing but receive. God does all the work. He came into our world, taking on our flesh and blood. He lived and died for us. He rose again. He comes to us in the Gospel to convert us, to give us faith, to keep us in that faith. We do nothing but receive. That's hard for us to accept, hard for us to swallow, since we have all been taught that we need to work for what we get. And if we are to get eternal life then (our human reason tells us) we must need to do *something*. But our human reason is wrong. (pause)

“*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Nothing but receive the gift. Nothing but believe the promise. Nothing but trust God’s grace. Jesus has done it all. For you. **He** has done the work, reconciling God and man by His life/death/resurrection. Take it, it is yours.

And even *that* – the faith which receives the Gospel gift – even that is God’s work. It is exactly as the Catechism teaches us in the Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.

Not one word there about anything that *we* do, but all about what God has done. He calls. He gathers. He enlightens. He sanctifies. He keeps us in the Christian faith. And, again, all *we* do is receive.

How simple and beautiful that is! What a load off of our minds and hearts, when we realize that God does it all for us. We don’t come to Him; He comes to us! 2000 years ago in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And today in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Calling us and adopting us in baptism. Inviting and sustaining us through His Word. Feeding us with His holy Supper. Leading us, guiding us, filling us with His presence.

In all these things, it is God who does the work and not us. The Law is answered, it is fulfilled, it is finished – not by anything *we* might do, but by God Himself. What a joyful message that is!

And yet, the truth of the matter is that there IS a place for our works. Not in order “*to inherit eternal life*”. But rather in response to receiving that free gift of eternal life in Christ. That is, we do good works because we already have peace with God through Christ. Such works show our gratitude to God by living in a way that pleases Him. In a way that serves our neighbor, so that they might see God’s goodness and love in us. And there the commandments give us a wonderful, a perfect, guide.

It is in our stations in life, in our vocations, in our relationships with other people that we live such lives of love. Luther asks in the Catechism: “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker?” In the “Table of Duties” we are given Bible passage after Bible passage which teach us how to live out those commandments – not in order to win salvation, but simply because we have already been given it in Christ. (pause)

The rich man in our lesson went away sorrowful, we are told. Sorrowful because he loved his possessions. Sorrowful because he finally saw his sin. Sorrowful because the Law gave him no comfort. But there is an old Church tradition that says that this rich man was none other than St. Mark himself, the author of this very Gospel. If so, then that sorrow was changed to joy by the Gospel, by Christ for him. So it is for us too. Go in peace, your sin is forgiven in Christ. Go in peace, and serve the Lord in gladness. Amen.

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

OS — Offertory/Offering

FE — Nicene Creed (p. 166)