

Sermon

Proper 23B October 13, 2024

Mark 10:17-31

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

So begins today’s gospel passage. I would guess it’s a question that we have all considered or asked at one time or another. Jesus answers the man by rattling off a list of Commandments: Don’t steal . . . Don’t murder . . . Don’t defraud . . . Don’t bear false witness . . . Don’t commit adultery . . . Honor you father and your mother.

“Yes, yes, I’ve done all that. But what *ELSE* can I do?”

Jesus looks at him and says, “Go, sell all you own, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow me.”

“Oh . . . well . . . um . . . wow . . . Really? Let me go think about that . . . hoo-boy . . . that’s . . . um . . . Wow.”

Here are a few things to know about today’s gospel passage.

First, Jesus’ admonition to “sell what you own and give the money to the poor” was directed to *that* man. As we move into pledge season, aren’t you glad for that? As I’ve said before, “Context is everything,” and the context of this exchange is that Jesus is speaking directly to this particular man, not to his disciples, and not to a wider audience, including us.

Now, if you have discerned that God is calling you to sell all your possessions and help the poor, ala Saint Francis, that’s one thing; but neither Jesus nor I are telling you all to do that. So now that we have that out of the way, what is going on here. Why would Jesus put this requirement on this man?

The primary issue Jesus is addressing is attachment, and this is something that **is** addressed to all of us. The man went away because “he had many possessions.” Even though he has led a morally upright life, even though he has kept the commandments, even though he is interested in obtaining eternal life, his priorities are still his possessions, for in reality, they mean more to him than anything else. The real issue for this man was his inability to make God a priority. As one commentator says, “The man has a greater desire for his possessions than he does for eternal life.”

A second point is that it’s not only our possessions that get in the way of a right relationship with God, it’s what those possessions mean socially. Wealth tends to convey status and power, whether intentional or not. People will buy or build homes to symbolize or show off their wealth and status. They do the same with cars, clothes, and jewelry. Besides giving up his possessions, the man was loathe to give up the status and social position they represented or had led him to.

A third part of this interaction is the man's assumption or expectation that this is a transactional relationship. "What must I *DO* to inherit eternal life?" If I keep the commandments, then I will inherit eternal life. If I feed the hungry, then I will inherit eternal life. If I attend worship services every Sunday, then I will inherit eternal life. And the list goes on. But our relationship with God is not transactional. We don't do those things in order to inherit eternal life. We do those things because God loves us and that is how we show our appreciation.

While this passage is not telling us to sell all our possessions, this passage *IS* asking us to evaluate our relationship with our possessions and with God. By many standards, we are wealthy. We need to take an honest look at our wealth, our lives, and our practices and evaluate how those possessions hinder or help our relationship with God.

As we make those evaluations, we must also be reminded that we do not and cannot do anything to be saved. "Who can be saved?" the disciples ask each other. Jesus' response is basically, "It's only through the grace of God that people are saved." What we are asked to do is to continually evaluate our priorities and work to make sure that our possessions don't possess us.

And then Jesus closes out with something interesting. How many of us have heard the prosperity gospel preached? That is something like, "God will reward you with all kinds of blessings if you say the words and commit to him." Things like the Prayer of Jabez, which was popular several years ago. Or a belief that following Christ will automatically set you up to be rich and powerful. That message is a heresy that has no basis in scripture.

But look closely at what Jesus does say: those who leave homes, family, income, for his sake will receive a hundredfold all those things - and *persecutions*. Following Christ will lead to persecution. And not those claims of persecution because you weren't allowed to put up the Ten Commandments in a courtroom, or because teacher-led prayer was removed from schools, or because of any other faux Christian outrage. We probably won't be killed because of our faith, but we may experience modern-day persecutions because you choose to follow Christ instead of society, or because you choose to feed the hungry in opposition to government edicts, or because you give homeless people shelter and access to personal hygiene, or because you choose humbleness over power.

This gospel passage isn't telling us to sell all our possessions; but it is telling us to honestly evaluate our priorities. It is asking us to evaluate whether we own possessions, or our possessions own us. It does remind us that the gate to eternal life isn't based on what we do, but that what we do is a generous response to God's love for us. And it reminds us that following Christ will not be easy.

Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What you can do is to evaluate your life so that your actions match your words, ensuring that God really is your first priority.

Amen.