

“The Good Teacher”

*And as he 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?” (Mark 10:17).*

There once was an old, itinerant preacher who came to a small country town to lead a revival in the local church. Upon his arrival, he spent part of the day in a diner promoting the revival to anyone who would listen. As he finished his pitch and made his way out of the little restaurant, he remembered that he had a letter to mail. He was, of course, a stranger in town and didn't know the location of the post office, so he hailed a little boy who happened to be riding by on his bike. When the bike skidded to a stop, the old preacher asked the boy for directions to the town post office. The boy politely gave him directions and then turned to ride off, but, recognizing the promotional opportunity in front of him, the preacher said, “Young man, if you come to the church tonight, you can hear *me* give directions on how to get to heaven.” Without missing a beat the boy responded, “I don't think I'll be there. You don't even know how to get to the post office.”

In today's Gospel reading, we meet a man who asks Jesus directions on how to get to heaven. Mark doesn't tell us his name. We don't know the circumstances surrounding this unexpected meeting, and Mark hardly provides any details at all about this character. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the man was “young” (Matthew 19:20). Luke mentions that the unknown man was a “ruler” of some kind (Luke 18:18). But beyond these brief descriptions, we simply don't know much about this guy. And yet, in the last line of the reading, Mark tells us that this man who asked Jesus about eternal life was one who “had great possessions.” In fact, each one of the three evangelists who included this story in their Gospel makes sure to mention that this man was very wealthy. In an account that's so skimpy on details, these words jump off the page. This was a rich man. In fact, all three Gospel writers are careful to share this detail, and this fact makes the opening action of our reading remarkable.

Mark writes that the “man ran up and knelt before him” (Mark 10:17). The rich man's approach was one of humility. First, a man of great wealth would never “run” anywhere; certainly not so that he could then take the modest posture of kneeling before some unauthorized, religious teacher. But in this gesture, we see that this rich, young ruler looked to Jesus as more than just another Rabbi. He truly respected Jesus and his question showed that he was thinking beyond his life in this world. “Good Teacher...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). After all of the questions Jesus had been asked in the previous chapters: questions about fasting... questions about healing on the Sabbath... questions about eating with unclean hands... questions about who was the greatest in the Kingdom of God... questions on the lawfulness of divorce... questions designed to test him... questions meant to trap him... questions focused on all the wrong things... after all of these questions, this rich, young ruler finally asked Jesus a question that mattered. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

In some ways, the man's question must have thrilled Jesus. Finally, someone seemed concerned with eternal things! Yet even with his humble approach and earnest greeting, Jesus knew that the rich man's question was born of a sinful and arrogant heart, and so in response, Jesus began with a question of his own, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). Jesus' odd response to the man was not false humility and it wasn't an attempt to confuse the young man. Rather, in this question, Jesus launched an attack on the rich man's flawed thinking; one meant to redefine the idea of what it meant to be good and to reveal the true motive behind the man's question.

You see, the man's initial inquiry showed that his understanding of God's Kingdom was completely dependent on what *he* could do. He understood “goodness” as something that was connected to performance and worth, and, as a man of “great” wealth, his question about eternal life was essentially this: “How much is this going to cost...What's it going to take...What do I need do to get to heaven?” And Jesus wouldn't stand for even a hint of this self-righteous theology. Without even giving the man a chance to respond, Jesus moved right to the

heart of issue. “You know the commandments” Jesus said. “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother” (Mark 10:19).

In these words, it almost sounds as though Jesus was answering the man’s questions about eternal life by telling him to simply keep the commandments, and you can almost see the man’s chest puffing up with pride as he answered the good teacher by saying “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” *And there it was!* In just a few simple sentences, Jesus had uncovered the truth. With surgical precision, Jesus had diagnosed the man’s problem and now, as he stood in front of this patient who (spiritually speaking) was dying on the table, He pressed ahead to cut out the cancer that was consuming this man’s soul. “You lack one thing:” Jesus said “go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

With these words, Jesus made the decisive cut. He knocked the self-reliant legs out from underneath this wealthy, would-be disciple, and, as Mark records, “disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” (Mark 10:22). Jesus’ goal in this brief meeting was not to encourage this man to work harder, or to be a better commandment keeper, or even to give away his wealth. His words to the rich man were designed to strip away any pretense of perfection, any illusion of goodness to which this man was clinging, and to expose the truth of his sinful, dying heart. And today, that is exactly what we need to hear in these words.

Think for a moment about what “wealth” looked like in Jesus’ day. I mean, Jesus never had an iPhone. The disciples never rode in an SUV. There were no antibiotics or first responders and, if surgery was even possible, they certainly didn’t use any anesthesia. And not even the young, ruler from our story could have refrigerated food or turned on a light. If this guy was rich, what does that make us?!?

The obvious implication of this question is that we are people of “great wealth.” Even in these days of high unemployment and great social need, we experience material abundance in ways that the people of the first century could never have imagined. And one of the great dangers of the relative wealth we all enjoy is that it feeds our egos. It encourages us to be independent; to make our way in the world without help from anyone else; and, in our world, self-reliance is one of life’s highest virtues. Are you making the connection? Brothers and sisters, we are just like the self-righteous man who approached Jesus asking what *he must do*. And just like the rich, young man we need to hear the crushing words Jesus speaks.

Jesus directed this man to the commandments precisely to teach him that he hadn’t...and he wouldn’t...and he couldn’t do what he must do to gain eternal life. In His words to the rich man, Jesus purposely focused on the commandments that deal with our outward actions, and He did that to show us that it isn’t a matter of *doing the right things*; that even when we do the outward actions demanded by God’s Law, we still have hearts that cling to our own efforts and abilities; we still have hearts that have broken the “first and greatest” commandment to love God above all things. And when we think about salvation, our self-justifying, self-reliant hearts naturally want to know what we need to do to get to heaven. And to our sinful hearts Paul writes that, “no one will be declared righteous in (God’s) sight by observing the law” (Romans 3:20). That is why Jesus deals with the rich man in the way He does, and the key to understanding His approach is found in verse 21 where Mark writes, “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mark 10:21). You see, the Law of God is centered in a love that cannot bear to see us dying in our sin, and the Law of God is given to us to show us how great our need truly is, to uncover our attempts to do it on our own, and to lead us to the one and only path to eternal life.

And today, I am here to tell you that just as Jesus looked at the rich man from our text, so also Jesus looks at us. He looks at us in our sin. He looks at us in our pride. He looks at us in our arrogance and He sees the truth of our hearts...and He loves us! In fact, He loves us so much that He willingly took on our sin, and resolutely carried it to the Cross, and there, alone, He died the death that we deserve...all so that we can follow Him to eternal life! Our salvation isn’t based on us in any way. It is only and always a result of the love that our Savior has for us sinners. And, believing His promise, we sinners have treasure in heaven. Amen.

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