

October 13, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Keep God in First Place!

The Sunday School teacher wanted to encourage her 3rd & 4th grade students to support mission work. Sadly, she used logic, not love, but anyways... She asked her class, "If you had a million dollars, would you give it to mission work?" "Yes," the class enthusiastically replied. "If you had a thousand dollars, would you give it to mission work?" "Yes!" "What if you had a hundred dollars?" "Sure!" "What if you had one dollar, would you give it to mission work?" She hoped that they would all give at least a dollar to mission work. One little boy, though, said, "No." "Why not?" "Because I HAVE a dollar." He did not want to let go of the money he had for the sake of God's kingdom.

A rich man had a troubled conscience

We see a similar attitude in today's gospel lesson. It's a captivating story with a lot of neat details. A young man approached Jesus. He was the kind of guy you'd like your daughter to meet. He was sincere and lived a good, moral life. He was rich! He worked in the church. He was well-respected. He genuinely wanted to be in heaven. He was eager to follow Jesus. What more could you hope for? He RAN to Jesus, fell on his knees showing respect and asked (:17), "**Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**"

Doesn't that question surprise you? If he was such an outstanding moral fellow wasn't he already doing everything that God wanted? Yet, he asked Jesus what he had to do, because he still was not sure of heaven. I read about a psychologist who asks new patients, "What is it about yourself that you are least willing to share with other people?" The two most common answers are: "I feel utterly worthless" and "I don't love anyone as I should." People instinctively know that they are not the kind of people they could or should be. God has given each of us a conscience that lets us know if we are doing something good or bad. That young man had a troubled conscience. He was living a good moral life, but his conscience was telling him that something was missing. He knew that he was not right with God.

Jesus gently led him to see why his conscience was troubled

This man was sincerely searching, not attacking Jesus as the Pharisees and others did. So Jesus dealt gently with him. Jesus first established his credentials so the man would listen to him. The man called him "good" and only God is good. Jesus was saying, "Do you recognize that I am God? Are you willing to listen to me when I tell you something that you might not like to

hear?" The man asked what he had to DO. So Jesus quickly reviewed the commandments. I can hear the man's excitement as he nearly cuts Jesus off (:20), "**Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy.**" Jesus could have replied, "I'm not just a teacher. Remember, I'm God." But Jesus was gentle with him. Nor did Jesus yell at him, "You SAY you've kept the commandments, but God demands a pure heart too. Maybe you didn't murder, but you've held a grudge in your heart. Maybe you did not commit adultery, but you have lusted. Maybe you did not steal, but you have been greedy." Etc. Jesus does not yell at him. He was gentle.

Mark tells us (:21), "**Jesus looked at him [focused attention] and loved him [was truly concerned about giving him what he needed most.]**" He led the man to see why his conscience was troubled. He began (:21), "**One thing you lack.**" I can see the fellow eager to hear that he only had to do one thing. Jesus continued (:21), "**Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**" Jesus gently told him that even though he had a lot of money on this earth, there was a greater treasure waiting for him in heaven. Jesus even invited the man to follow him. But he missed those points because Jesus told him to give all his money away. Jesus did not tell this man to sell all he had and give it to the poor because that will earn you a place in heaven. He told him to sell everything because he wanted this young man (who was really impressed with himself for keeping all the commandments) to realize on his own that he really had not even kept the first commandment – You shall have no other gods before me. This man did not have God as first place in his heart and life. Jesus led him to realize that he had a troubled conscience because he was not right with God. His priorities were mixed up. Having lots of money is not sinful – except when you love it more than God, which was this guys problem.

Mark tells us that his "**face fell.**" He was stunned. Just the thought of giving away his money made him sad. It was like he had been stabbed in the heart. Just like that little boy in Sunday School, he was NOT willing to give up his money for the sake of God's kingdom. Instead of trying to learn more from Jesus, he simply turned and walked away. How sad.

Jesus taught his disciples, and us, about priorities

The disciples mouths must have been hanging open with shock as they watched the man walk away. They must have been thinking, "Jesus, you just turned away a guy with lots of money who wanted to follow you. What are you thinking?" Jesus broke the silence (:23), "**How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!**" He repeated himself for emphasis and continued (:25), "**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.**" Money and the

things that money can buy are like a super powerful magnet that pulls people away from Jesus. That's why so many people waste their money on the lottery. How many marriages and families have been ruined because people were chasing after money? How many have ruined their health and made their lives miserable because of their love of money? When people get sucked in by the love of money, they leave Jesus behind. And without Jesus, there's no heaven.

It is difficult for most people to get a thread through the eye of a needle. The eye of a needle is very small. And a camel was the largest animal most Jews had ever seen – up to 7 feet tall at the top of its hump. There is no way a camel can fit through the eye of a needle. It is impossible. And that was Jesus' point. It is impossible for someone to enter heaven as long as they set their hearts upon earthly things. In fact, it's impossible to be saved as long as anything is more important to you than God.

Jesus was teaching his disciples and us about priorities. We need to get rid of anything that is getting in the way of our relationship with God. If you were the one talking with Jesus that day, what one thing in your life would he tell you to give up or give away? Maybe it would be hard for you give up money, or some other material possession – your car, your home, your television, or your cell phone (ouch!). What if Jesus told you to stop watching Packer games? What is your dearest treasure? What if he told you to say good-bye to a friend who was a bad influence on you? It might be your career. It might be your children's sports. There is *something* in *every* human heart about which, if Jesus said, "Give that up and follow me" would make us sad. Whatever it is that might make you sad, that might make you wonder just for a moment if it would really be worth it to give it up if that's what Jesus commanded, that is a false idol in your heart. None of us have even kept the First Commandment.

No wonder the disciples were amazed. If keeping the First Commandment really is that important, if God pays just as much attention to what our hearts crave as he does to what we do, if being a good person who goes to church and helps others and listens to Jesus doesn't get us any closer to heaven, then, as the disciples asked (:26), "**Who then can be saved?**" Who can constantly keep Jesus as number one in their hearts and lives? Who can make sure that nothing ever, even for a moment, gets between them and God? None of us can. It's impossible. As we admitted just a few minutes ago, "I have not loved you with my whole heart."

God did the impossible to save us

Jesus agreed (:27), "**With man this is impossible, [then he added] but not with God; all things are possible with God.**" God can become completely

human while remaining completely God. God can live a perfect life on this earth keeping his priorities straight all the time. God can offer his perfect life as the payment for all your sin. God can take the blame for every sin, every mixed-up priority, for everyone in the history of the whole world. Jesus did all of that for you. You are forgiven and he keeps on forgiving you again and again and again. His mercies are new every morning. He treats us gently, not as our sins deserve. God can rise from the dead to guarantee you life after death in heaven. God can work faith in your heart so that the love of riches (or anything else in this world) is replaced with the love of God. God did the impossible to save you. Alleluia!

Maybe you sometimes look at your life and feel that it is impossible that God could ever love someone like you. Maybe you are struggling with a troubled conscience. Maybe some days you do not feel so beautiful or precious or pure. Maybe you feel it is impossible that your future will be OK because of everything that's happening in your messed-up life. Maybe that's how you sometimes feel when you look at your life. So stop looking at your life, and look instead at Jesus. Look at the life on the cross and the one that came out of the grave on Easter morning, and see what's possible for God. When you look at the good life of Jesus you see everything you need to guaranty your eternal future in which every tear is wiped away, where you do not need to worry about anything, where love and joy never fade.

We are like a recovering addict. Just like the recovering alcoholic has to start his battle against the bottle again each morning, we need to focus on our heart each morning and fight to keep sin away and keep Jesus as first place in our hearts and lives, more important than anyone or anything else in this world. It is no coincidence that the Holy Spirit did not tell us whatever happened to that rich man. I'd like to think that he eventually realized that money can not buy happiness, let alone a spot in heaven. I'd like to think that he heard about Jesus' death and resurrection and realized that Jesus was the most important thing in his life. I'd like to think that, but we do not know. By leaving the story, in a sense, incomplete, the Holy Spirit prompts us to examine our own relationship with Jesus and realize again how much we need him. And as you reflect on God's amazing love for you, the Holy Spirit will strengthen your faith so that you keep God in first place. Amen.