

## Problem Solved

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. **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.”** Here ends our text.

Sometimes when you’re really looking out for a person, you have to tell them what’s wrong. Give them bad news. It’s not always easy. But for things to get better, they first need to see the problem, before they can get on with the solution. A doctor has to show the tumor on the x-rays before his patient is convinced he needs treatment. Family member and friends need to perform an intervention with an alcoholic to show him how he’s destroying himself and his family before he’ll seek help. Breaking this bad news often brings sorrow. But we do it out of love. We want them to get better.

In our Gospel lesson today, there’s a man with a problem, but he doesn’t really know it yet. Jesus needs to first give him some bad news. But Jesus does it out of love, because he wants the man to get better. Jesus first tells him the Law to prepare him for the Gospel.

This man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him. He gave Jesus honor and respect. But for what reason? He asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now, there are all kinds of things wrong with this question. When I was in seminary, I had a particular professor in the systematics department. Whenever we asked a question that started from the wrong premise, he always answered, “Wrong question.” Jesus could have answered, “Wrong question,” to this man, but instead he shows him where he’s gone wrong. Jesus answers him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Now *we* know that Jesus is God, and he is good. But this man simply called Jesus, “Good Teacher,” not “LORD.” He only saw Jesus as just a man, a teacher. He knelt before Jesus and gave him honor like we would show respect to a professor or doctor or magistrate because of their great learning. But Jesus reminds him that no man, no matter how great he seems, is good. Only God is good. And so this man couldn’t be good either.

The second thing wrong with this man’s question is he asks, “What must I *do* to *inherit* eternal life. This question is a contradiction. When a lawyer reads a will to the surviving children of the deceased and apportions the inheritance, no son or daughter ever says, “Now what must I *do* to receive this inheritance.” You don’t *do* anything to receive an inheritance. It’s a gift passed on from one father or mother to their children. They didn’t earn it. You receive an inheritance because of *who* you are not what you *do*. This man can’t *do* anything to inherit a gift.

This man’s wrong question, implying that men are good and they can do something to inherit eternal life, sets off an alarm in Jesus’ head. This man has a problem, and to help him Jesus needs to show him where he’s gone wrong. Jesus does a little investigative work into what this man believes. He replies to his question, “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.’” In a sense, if you do want to do something to inherit eternal life, keep the Law, if that were possible. Surprisingly, with a straight face, the man says to Jesus, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”

Now sometimes we may be tempted to think like this man. “Sure, I’ve never killed anyone. I’ve never had an affair. I’ve never shoplifted or robbed a bank. I’ve never perjured myself in court. I’ve never shown disrespect to my parents. I’m a good person.” Like this man we think of the blatant, obvious violations of God’s Law. “Yes, all these things I have kept from my youth.” But remember Jesus said that anyone who’s angry with his brother or calls him a

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17-22

name is guilty of murder. And anyone who looks with lust has already committed adultery in his heart. Love your enemies. You must be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect, not only in what you do, but also in what you say and think.

This man's problem is that he thinks he's kept the Law. He's self-righteous even as he kneels at Jesus' feet. But this man is a condemned sinner who will perish in hell. Jesus needs to show him his error before he can get better. But Jesus does this in love. "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.'" Like a skilled surgeon, Jesus points to exactly where the tumor is. This man is wealthy and he loves his possessions. He loves them more than God. Jesus shows him that he hasn't kept the first commandment. "You shall have no other gods." "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." After hearing Jesus tell him that he must sell all his wonderful possessions and follow him, the man became disheartened. He went away sorrowful because he had great wealth. He was sorrowful because he knew he couldn't give up all his possessions for Jesus. This was something he couldn't do. Earthly possession or eternal life? He chose the possessions and went away from Jesus.

Now understand that Jesus isn't telling us that we get into heaven by keeping the commandments. That if we sell all that we have and give it to the poor, we'll have eternal life. No, we can't do anything to inherit eternal life. And even if this man sold all his possessions, like Jesus told him, he couldn't buy his way into heaven. But Jesus is simply using the Law as a mirror to show us our sin, show us our problem. The Law is like an eye examination chart. Sure, we can read the giant "E" at the top, but we can't read the third row down. The chart shows our eyesight is imperfect. The Law shows us we're imperfect. That's bad news. We hear the Law and go away sorrowful because we know we haven't kept it, nor can we keep it. We're not good. We become disheartened like the man in our story.

But Jesus shows us our sin because he looked on us and loved us. He first shows us our sin so we realize we need help and can't help ourselves. So we realize we need him. All those laws we can't keep, Jesus kept for us. He alone is good in thought, word, and deed. But he wasn't good just to show us how we could be good. Jesus gives us his goodness, his righteousness. He gave up everything he had, even his own life and gave it to the poor. He gave it for us, the poor in spirit, who through the Law humbly realize we're sinners and need his help. Not by keeping the commandments, but through faith in him are we righteous. Through faith we receive his righteousness, his goodness. Through faith he makes us his children and gives us an inheritance, treasure in heaven. We receive this inheritance because of who we are, his children, not because of what we do.

There was a boy who struggled seeing the words on the blackboard at school. His mother loved him and took him to the doctor's office for an eye examination. He promptly failed the exam. He didn't want to wear glasses, but his mother loved him and insisted he get them. She bought him a pair of glasses at the optical store and had them adjusted. As they came out of the store at night, the boy looked up into the sky. "Oh, look at all the beautiful stars!" he said with excitement. He had never seen them so clearly before. The eye chart showed him his weakness, but the glasses showed him the stars. In the same way, the Law shows us our sin, but the Gospel shows us our Savior.

Because Jesus looks on us and loves us, he first shows us our problem in the Law. But his love doesn't end there. He wants us to get better. He gives us the solution in the Gospel. He gives us himself. Problem solved. Amen.

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