

**WHAT AM I TO DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?**  
**Sermon for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2018**  
**Mark 10:17-22**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before Mark 10:17-22: **17 As Jesus was going out onto the road, a man came running to Him and fell on his knees before Him. He asked Him, “Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”**

**18 Jesus asked him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One, that is, God. 19 You know the Commandments: ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not give false testimony,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honour your father and mother!’”**

**20 He told Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child.”**

**21 Jesus looked straight at him and loved him. He told him, “You lack one thing, Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor! You will have treasure in heaven. Then come here and follow Me!”**

**22 He looked gloomy when he heard that and went away sad, because he had great wealth.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

If you were wealthy, would you give away all you have if asked to do so? This is the predicament the man in our text was faced with. Mark doesn't identify the man, except to say that **he had great wealth**. In his account, Luke calls him a ruler, meaning that maybe he was a member of an official council or court, and in his account, Matthew says he was young. Anyhow, Mark says that **17 As Jesus was going out onto the road, a man came running to Him and fell on his knees before Him. He asked Him, “Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”**

Although this man is young and rich, the fact that he's come running to Jesus to ask the question tells us that this is a zealous man who really wants to follow the Lord. To the disciples and others gathered around, this is an excellent prospect for a follower. They wished that everyone would be so zealous to follow Jesus, and this is the kind of person who appears that he has gotten his act together. He's the kind of person who would be an asset for whatever sort of plan or strategy needs to be launched. And it looks like he's already in because he's actually run to where Jesus is and knelt before him.

Perhaps for the disciples they were relieved, since they had just endured a hectic and rough few weeks. First there was the fiasco after the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, when many disciples left.<sup>1</sup> Then there have been these strange, discomfiting predictions by Jesus that He's going to be crucified,<sup>2</sup> and then when they had tried to stop the little ones coming to Jesus, they had received a firm rebuke from Him.<sup>3</sup> But here's a nice change: A young, rich, intelligent man has appeared, who wants to be a disciple. But looks can be deceiving.

The conversation doesn't go anything like the disciples expected. Rather, this same man who came running and knelt before Jesus would soon walk away full of sorrow. Why did this happen? It happened because this young man asked a question that was completely flawed.

**“Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”** The question tells us that this man assumes he can work his way into heaven by doing the things that he does. What he is asking Jesus is this: *“How much more of God's Law do I have to keep in order to earn my way into eternal life? What do I have to do?”* Although the man is sincere, he is far from faith: He doesn't want Jesus to save him from sin, but to approve of who he is and the good that he has done.

Since the man asks a question about keeping the commandments, Jesus gives him an answer about keeping the commandments: **“Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One, that is, God. 19 You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not give false testimony,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honour your father and mother.’”**

In other words, since the man asks, **“what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”** Jesus says, *“Keep God's commandments.”*

But this preaching of the Law only leaves the man smug: Is this all there is to it? He's nearly home free already! What good news! And so he exults, **“Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child.”** How easy can it be!

<sup>1</sup> John 6ff

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:21; Mark 9:31

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:13-15

Then the bomb drops. Jesus, who loves this man, preaches one more bit of Law: **“You lack one thing, Go, sell everything you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come here and follow Me.”**

This time, the man sees how the Law accuses him, and it crushes him. Jesus has just pointed out to him his sin. But what sin is that, exactly?

The sin our Lord condemns here is *not wealth*; Jesus is not preaching a sermon against the evils of being rich. We must make this clear so that we can understand the true sin and the marvellous Gospel of this text. Bible stories like this one have been used to declare that wealth is sinful; therefore, for instance, in Luther’s time it was considered a great work to sell all and make a vow of poverty, for poverty was considered to be more pleasing to God. However, this is not what the Lord is saying. Granted, wealth has its dangers. Those who have riches are tempted to trust in those riches instead of the Lord.

So, is the sin greed? There is greed here, yes. The man has much in the way of riches, and he would rather keep them than love his neighbour and give them to the poor. So, yes, there is greed at play here, but the greed is not the big problem here: There is a *far more dangerous sin at work.*

The greater sin is this: The man thinks that he can save himself by how well he works at keeping God’s commands. He believes that he can work his way into heaven by being good enough. When Jesus lists several commands, the man is delighted because he can tick them off and say, *“I’ve kept them! I’m on track!”* But then the Lord says, *“If you are so virtuous that you can keep all of God’s commandments, then you won’t be in love with your money; you’ll be able to give it all away. If you’re going to save yourself by your work, then prove it. **Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor! You will have treasure in heaven. Then come here and follow Me!**”*

The Lord shows the man that he suffers from greed, though he didn’t know it until that moment; and because he suffers the sin of greed, he isn’t keeping all of God’s commands and he certainly can’t earn eternal life. For greed, the man can be forgiven as he trusts in Jesus, the Saviour, but as long as the man believes that he can save himself, he does not trust in Jesus to save him; thus, *there is no forgiveness.* The Lord shoots down his whole plan of salvation.

But listen carefully to the Lord’s words again: He preaches the Law, yes, in order to show the man that he cannot save himself, thus the words **Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor!** but the Lord says these words in order that the man might be saved; therefore, Jesus preaches the Gospel, saying as it were: *“Come, take up the cross, and follow Me.”* In other words, Jesus says to the man: *“You can’t save yourself. But I can. I will save you by going to the cross and dying for your sin. Do not trust in your own efforts, but in mine. I will share my cross with you, so that you do not have to suffer and die for your sin. You can’t save yourself. But I can.”*

The Lord declares to this man the Gospel, telling him that He will bear the cross for him. Sadly, these words are too much for the man and his preconceived notions. He arrived expecting the Lord’s blessing for his keeping of the Law - and perhaps for his well-run life and wealth; instead, he’s told to throw it all away and trust in the cross instead. This is not the way he wants salvation, and this is not the way he wants the Saviour to be. Therefore, <sup>22</sup> **He looked gloomy when he heard that and went away sad.**

Jesus lets him go. One can even imagine the frowns of disapproval by some gathered around, that Jesus would drive away such a prospect with His teaching, but Jesus lets him go. He loves the man, but in love He will not force the man to be repentant. He will, however, go to the cross and die for the sins of the rich young man; if, later on, the man repents of his sin, the benefits of the cross will be there for him.

The message remains the same today: You can’t save you. Jesus has saved us. Unfortunately, because we sinful human beings keep asking the wrong question, we keep coming up with the wrong answer.

Sometimes the question is as crystal clear as that of the rich young man: **“Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”** Right away, we’re saying that there must be something we can do. But sadly, even though the question is wrong, there are plenty who will be happy to give an answer - a wrong answer.

In more than one church, the answer is that one must do good works in order to inherit eternal life. Keep all the commandments, at least as well as you can, and the Lord will graciously open the gates of heaven. This is a popular doctrine among individuals: As long as I belong to and/or attend church at least x number of times per year, I’ve done enough, and eternal life is mine. As long as I do my best each day, what more can God ask for?

But this is hardly confined to the church; this is the theology of the world: Do your best, do right by other people, and you will sleep in peace. The answer is appealing to our sinful nature - it means that we can do this on our own. But if thought through, it’s not a good answer at all. How much is enough? How many good works must you do in order to inherit eternal life? Can you do enough good works? The answer is no, you can’t.

Sometimes the question is more subtle: *“Now that Jesus has saved me, what must I do to keep that salvation?”* This starts out well - it credits Jesus with our salvation. But it goes on to assume that we build our faith and keep our salvation by the works that we do. Hence, many a church will teach, *“Now that you are saved, you can be sure you’ve maintained your salvation if you help others.”* Or, *“Now that you are a Christian, you can be sure you are saved as long as you’re improving.”* Or, *“Now that you are a Christian, you can be sure you are saved as long as you feel better than you did before.”* Now, let us be clear: Is it wrong to help others? Is it wrong to improve on some behaviours and habits? Is it wrong to feel better? No, it’s not. But none of these things cause God to love us or save us. If we believe that God loves us now because of these things, then we are saying God loves us for these things instead of Christ. Is this right? No. Can you build your faith and maintain your salvation by your works? No, you cannot.

Whenever we ask, **“Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”** the answer from the Lord is this: *“You can’t do a thing.”*

There is an answer and there is salvation, but it’s an answer to a different question. The question is not **“Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?”** The question is, “What has the Lord already done to give me eternal life?” And to such a question there is Good News in abundance.

What has the Lord done? Look to the Good Teacher in the text for this day. All those commandments that He listed for the rich young man, He kept, perfectly. He kept all of God’s Law. Did He give all that He had to the poor? Yes: He gave all that He had - not just for the poor, but for all people. He offered His back to those who scourged Him, His scalp to those who crowned Him with thorns. He allowed His hands, feet and side to be pierced for this sinful world. Did He give all? Yes, in a depth that we cannot even begin to contemplate. Unlike the man in our text, did Jesus take up the cross? Yes. He took up the cross, and on that cross He died for the sins of the world. That is what the Lord has done.

But He is not finished. The Good Teacher now offers that cross to us. By His holy Law preached this day, He still warns and accuses of sin - not so that we walk away sorrowful, but so that we would repent and turn away from that which would destroy us, repentance by the way, which is not our work but the work of the Holy Spirit. By His holy Gospel, He gives us His cross. He takes away our sins - we need not suffer and die for them because He already has. He gives us His righteousness, giving us the credit and benefits of His perfect keeping of God’s Law. He makes us His family, members of His household. He marks us with His cross in Holy Baptism, that we might be joined to His death. He gives us His body and blood in His holy supper, that we might be joined to His life.

Dear friends, you can’t save yourself, but He can, and He has. Faithfully, again and again He grants us the forgiveness of all our sins. This is the Good News He has for us - that He has won salvation for us and gives it freely, and this is the message that He calls us to proclaim as a Church - continually and faithfully. At times, people will hear and walk away - even some as attractive and “with-it” as the rich young ruler. We watch such go with sorrow, praying that they will return to the grace of God while there is still time. And we continue to preach the same life-giving Gospel which our Lord proclaimed and fulfilled: We are sure of our salvation: Not because we can earn it, but because it has been won for us by Jesus’ death and resurrection. Amen.

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

#### PRAYER FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, heavenly Father, we come to You in the precious name of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to praise You and pray to You. We thank You for Your constant love to us in days of happiness and prosperity, and for Your unfailing mercy in times of trouble and hardship. We thank You also for the joys of family life, the warmth of friends, and the blessings of all other God-pleasing human relationships. We praise You for giving us clear and sure directions for our life, and for standing by us when the future looks dark and uncertain. But, above all else, we thank and praise You for the gift of Your dear Son, through whose death and resurrection You have made us Your own for ever, and shown such great love to us.

We trust You to continue to supply our food and clothing, and pray You to make us content with what You provide. Grant that we may not set our hearts on uncertain riches. Keep material things from competing with our duty to love You with our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Bless your church with faithful pastors. Give Your Church warm love for You, joy in its fellowship around the Gospel, faithfulness to Your Word, and eagerness to do Your work. Give us opportunities to witness to people who need to hear the Gospel from us, and bless our efforts for Your kingdom. Lead us daily by Your Holy Spirit, that we may understand Your Word and will more clearly, and to walk the path of faith, obedience, and love. Guide us by Your light, that we may turn

from every folly of our evil age, and use every opportunity to claim Your grace and to live in Your wisdom. Give us joy and happiness, not in evil, but in a life lived in fellowship with You and Your people.

Make all rulers obedient to You, so that all tyranny and oppression may be put down, all lust for power wiped out, and all love for man-made gods destroyed. Protect us from every enemy, so that we may live to serve You and our fellowmen in peace and safety.

Teach all in our families to look to You for every need. Provide them at the right time with everything they need for body and spirit. Guide them, above all else, to rejoice in Your Word, to give thanks to You for everything, and to sing hymns to Your praise.

Be with those who face sickness or sorrow, trouble or danger, and free them from all worry and distress. Be with those who suffer persecution and injustice, and increase their faith and trust as they wait patiently for Your deliverance.

Grant us all these things, and anything else we need, in Christ's name and for His sake. Amen.

### 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

<sup>6</sup> Be intent on the LORD and live, that He may not break in like a fire among the family of Joseph and that it may not burn it down! Bethel will have no one to put it out. <sup>7</sup> They are the ones who turn justice into wormwood. They have thrown righteousness down to the ground...

<sup>10</sup> They hate a person who reproves another at the city-gate. They abhor a person who speaks sincerely. <sup>11</sup> Therefore, because you have been trampling on a lowly person and, because you take a portion of his grain away from him, although you have built houses of hewn stone, you will nevertheless not live in them. Although you have planted pleasant vineyards, you will nevertheless not drink their wine. <sup>12</sup> For I know that your wrongdoings are numerous and that your sins are great. You attack righteous people, you take bribes and have been depriving poor people of justice at the city-gate. <sup>13</sup> That is why a person who has insight will keep silent at this time. For this is an evil time. <sup>14</sup> Search for what is good and not what is evil, that you may live! Then the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have been claiming. <sup>15</sup> Hate what is evil, love what is good and make justice effective in the city-gate! It may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remainder of Joseph.

Hebrews 3:12-19

<sup>12</sup> Be careful, fellow-Christians, that none of you has in him a wicked, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God! <sup>13</sup> Rather, encourage one another daily, while it is called "Today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin! <sup>14</sup> For we have become people who share in Christ, if we firmly hold the reality that we had at the beginning until the end. <sup>15</sup> When it is said: "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as you did in the rebellion!" <sup>16</sup> Who, indeed, were those that heard Him and rebelled? Were they not, in fact, all those who were brought out of Egypt through Moses? <sup>17</sup> With whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned and whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup> To whom did He declare on oath that they would not enter His place of rest, if it was not to those

who disobeyed? <sup>19</sup> So, we see that they could not enter because of unbelief.

Mark 10:17-22

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus was going out onto the road, a man came running to Him and fell on his knees before Him. He asked Him, "Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?"

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