

"The Forgotten Commandment"

Mark 10:17-22

October 14, 2018

21st Sunday after Pentecost

It is said that we are often most critical of those people who have the same flaws and shortcomings that we do. In other words, when we recognize flaws and shortcomings in ourselves, instead of being critical of ourselves and attempt to change things, we criticize who exhibit the same flaws and shortcomings so that we don't have to face our own problems.

This is true of pastors. In our classes at seminary on how to prepare and deliver sermons, we were told that pastors often preach stronger and more emphatic against sins that they were dealing with in their own lives. We often joked with one another that, if you heard five sermons in a row on drunkenness or ten sermons a row on sexual immorality, you better keep an eye on that pastor.

This might just be the case in our text for today. We read the story of a rich man and his efforts to obtain eternal life. We look at his effort to obtain eternal life, the priorities he has in his life, and some of the choices that he makes and we become very critical. We righteously proclaim, "How could he do what he did?" However, is our criticism of him righteous anger which is justified or simply blasting him strongly in order to divert attention from the fact that we are struggling with the same issues that he is?

Our Gospel reading for today begin when this rich man comes to Jesus, kneels at His feet and asks him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man seems sincere enough. Only a severe cynic would think that he had ulterior motives. He is pursuing a very serious goal and objective which many in our society today are not pursuing. While we may see Jesus' critique about being called "good" as a slight criticism of this man, overall this is a sincere inquiry after an important thing: eternal life. Therefore, we commend him for this.

However, our criticism begins with the man's assumption of how eternal life is obtained: it is the result of something that he has to do. He does not ask, "How shall I receive eternal life?" Rather, he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Our theological guns come out blazing to blast away at such blatant self-righteousness.

However, Jesus doesn't criticize or correct him. Rather, Jesus plays along. If the rich young man wants to talk about things he must do, then Jesus directs them to the list of what God requires us to do: the Ten Commandments. Jesus says, "You know the commandments: Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud (which many think is a summation of the 9th and 10th Commandments), honor your father and mother." We might notice already something that the man fails to note. These are Commandments only from the second table of the law which deal with our obligation to our neighbor.

The man claims that he is kept all of these commandments since he was a youth. Now we might be really critical of him. We might complain about his arrogance in actually thinking he had obeyed the entire law of God. We may decry the hypocrisy here and think that he is only pretending to have kept the law. However, he was likely very sincere and actually believed that he kept the law in its entirety. Perhaps, this is why it is said later on in the text that Jesus loved him. Jesus could see that he was a pious and sincere member of God's people who was truly interested in the things of God.

Maybe we think this way and have these criticisms because this man is too much like us. Many people today who have any sort of interest in God are interested in obtaining eternal life. Some may think that it is simply granted to everyone. But many realize that there must be

some sort of requirement to obtain it. Non-Christians will assume that they must do something in order to earn eternal life. But many Christians think somewhat in the same way, although we may not be as blatant as the man in our text. We just know that we should be obeying the Ten Commandments.

But how? Like the rich man in our text, we tend to think of the Law in terms of the Second Table. We think that obedience to the law of God refers to how we treat our fellow man. We may evaluate our behavior, perhaps as the rich man did, by thinking that we've done good enough. When you ask people about their behavior and whether it is sinful, they will often say something like, "Well, at least I haven't murdered anybody"; or, "At least I haven't robbed the bank"; or, "I haven't slept with anybody's wife."

People will compare their behavior with others and seek only to be better than them. Someone jokingly reworked the lyrics to the well-known hymn, "Chief of Sinners," to say, "Chief of sinners though I'd be; I thank God you're worse than me." Or, there is the story about two men camping in the woods who wondered about out running a bear if it should attack them. The first man said, "I sure hope that I can out run a bear the trays to attack us." The second man said, "I sure hope that I can out run you."

As the stories indicate, the thinking seems to be that, in order to be safe, all you have to do is be better than someone else. The rich man likely thought that he had kept the Commandments of God at least as good, if not better, than other people. We may think the same. We may think that we are pretty good in our obedience of the Law. At least, we are better than others and, therefore, should have no problem obtaining eternal life.

Surely, Jesus knew that this man's heart and that he had not perfectly obeyed the Law of God. However, he doesn't reject him, criticize him, or send him away. Instead, tests this man's fulfillment of the Law of God. Jesus says to the man, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Here, Jesus is not telling him what he must do to gain eternal life. Rather, Jesus is testing this rich man's claim that he had kept all the commandments. It soon becomes apparent that he had not kept all the commandments. He had forgotten one very important commandment. For, after Jesus spoke these words, the young man was disheartened and went away sorrowful. Why? Because he had great possessions.

The problem here is not that he had great possessions. Wealth, in and of itself, is neither good or evil. It is not a sin in having riches. The rich man's sin was that he had another God. He had forgotten the most important commandment of all. This is a commandment so important that it is first, both in the order of the commandments given and in its importance. And that commandment is this: "You shall have no other gods." The man's god was his wealth for, when given the choice between following Jesus to eternal life and following wealth to an enjoyable and comfortable life on earth, he chose the wealth.

The same is true for people today and especially for us. This is not a "how-to" story about how to earn your way to heaven. It is not a command for all Christians in all times and in all places to get rid of all things and live in poverty. This is a test for us about whether we remember the First Commandment. If we were asked to sell all, give all, and follow all, could we do it? Would we do it?

Sitting in church in hearing a sermon like this or discussing such a topic in Bible Class, we would all know the right answer to give. However, this is not a matter of knowing the right answer. It is a matter of doing the right thing. We all have our false gods. Some may bristle at this statement and disagree. However, that's probably only because they don't have an idol in their backyard to whom they bow down and burn incense.

But there is more to having a god than simply possessing an idol. Martin Luther, in his explanation of the first commandment in the Large Catechism, defines a false God in nonreligious terms. He writes, "A god is that to which we look for all good in which we find refuge in every time of need.... Therefore, I repeat, to have a God properly means to have something in which the heart trusts completely."

So, what is your God? Luther felt that money and possessions were the most common idol on earth. Our text for today bears this out. What is most important in your life when you have to make choices? For what would you sacrifice everything you have? On what do you depend for all good in your life.? In what do you trust completely? Like the man in our story, it could be your money and possessions. It could be your job or your pension/retirement fund. It could be your family or your friends. It could be sports, your electronic devices, pleasure, or any number of things which you cherish. What would you do – honestly and truly do – if Jesus said to you, "You lack one thing. Give it up. And come, follow me,"? The fact that our "gods" already lead us away from worship of the true God, the support of His mission with our talents and our financial resources, and joyful service to God and neighbor indicates that we might not be able to answer Jesus call in that way.

Our problem is not that we are unaware of the First Commandment. We memorize it in catechism class and we know the right answer to give. However, we often ignore it or forget it, pretending that it only applies to idols made of wood and stone.

The fact of the matter is that our sinful nature clings to the things of this world. We end up loving and cherishing created things more than we love and cherish the Creator. Even if we could confess, along with the man in our text, that we have kept all of the Commandments concerning our behavior toward our neighbor, we could never obey the First Commandment always and in its entirety.

The text has a very sad ending, as do the lives of many people whose god is anything other than the one true God. It seems as if there is no hope. And this is true, if we are looking for hope and a solution in ourselves. The answer to the obedience of the First Commandment and all of the other commandments is the answer to every question in a children's sermon: Jesus.

The only one who can remember all the commandments and perfectly keep them is Jesus. Jesus obeyed the commandments perfectly and we reap the benefit of it. The Bible Says, "for as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Jesus' obedience is credited to your account. You received that righteousness when you were baptized and your sins were washed away.

The only way to remove our failures is not by trying harder to obey the commandments and do what is right. The only way is to have those failures – sins – forgiven. Again, the answer is Jesus. Jesus earned that forgiveness for us by offering His holy life into death on the cross to make payment for the sin of the world. Trusting in Jesus, either as a gift given to you in Holy Baptism or when you first heard the Gospel message, means all of your past failures at keeping the Commandments, even the First Commandment, have been forgiven.

The only way to live past the grave forever is to be incorporated into the One who has already died, risen, and continues to live. Again, the answer is Jesus. By His resurrection, He has overcome death and the grave. He has opened the way to everlasting life through faith in Him. By being joined to him, in faith, we have eternal life now.

Therefore, give up your confidence in the flesh – that is, your ability to keep the Commandments and doing enough good to inherit eternal life. However, this is not an excuse

or justification for doing nothing. Think of a cancer patient who realizes that his home remedies cannot possibly cure the disease, but that the doctor possesses the cure and has prescribed treatment. Can you imagine such a patient forgoing treatment because he has something better to do? Or, receiving treatment only occasionally because he was too busy to come regularly? Such would be foolish thinking.

Hold on fervently to the gift of righteousness given to you in baptism. Eagerly and regularly receive the gift of forgiveness for every action of thought, word, deed which stains your righteousness. Hear it in the absolution and the Gospel. Taste and see it in the Lords Supper. Let nothing hinder you in receiving Christ's gifts for you, not in order to inherit eternal life, but because these gifts bring to you eternal life. Joyfully live lives of service to your neighbor as the Second Table of the law tell us to do, receiving the power and the skill from the Holy Spirit to do so.

Forgetting things can be harmful and even life-threatening. Forgetting to pay a bill can mean a late fee and interest charged to your account which can hinder you financially. Forgetting to close your garage door can mean your house will be robbed (as our family found out). Forgetting to fasten your seatbelt can mean death if you're in a car accident. Remembering only some of the Commandments, yet forgetting the 1st and chief commandment of the law can mean the difference between hell and eternal life. Remember the 1st Commandment so that it drives you to a total sense of despair and impossibility and keeping it. However, remember your Savior, Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the law for you by obeying the Commandments of God perfectly. He earned forgiveness for all of your sin's by completely paying your debt before God. He has opened up to you the way of eternal life as a free gift for which you have to do nothing. Remember that and never forget it. Amen