

Introduction

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation this morning is the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark, the eleventh chapter, verses seventeen through twenty-two

Good Morning boys and girls, I pray that you all are well today. Have you ever been bored? I am sure you have. You might sit down and wonder what you can do. You could do chores around the house, you could play a game. There are many things you could do. In our text for today, a young man comes to Jesus and asks what he has to do, not to help mom or dad, but to get eternal life. What do we need to do? Is there anything we can do? Ponder those questions as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

1. The Question: What Must I Do to Be Saved?

A. The Question Is Basic to Us All

Today we meet a focused young man, one of means. He has an interest in things that count, such as eternal life, as well as many riches to count as he searches for that ultimate treasure. A winning combination it would seem. But he has not yet found the answer, for he comes to Jesus with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

If there were ever a question that demands the correct answer, it is this one about eternal life. We must know the right answer! Here is a man on a search! One can imagine this young man searching out teachers of the faith, asking questions about life’s deepest realities. We can surmise that

at least once, one of his teachers may have told him, “Son, if you want to have eternal life, if you want to be blessed in your life by God and live in his favor, then follow his teachings. Put yourself to the task of doing his will. Do your best to keep his commands. If you do this, you will have everything you desire—a happy life, a meaningful existence—and you will make a difference.” Our sinful human nature also wants to know the answer to that question: “What, indeed, must we do to inherit eternal life?” All the world’s religions claim to have an answer to that question, though their view of “eternal life” can vary widely. For example, Hinduism says you have to be good to others, enough that it outweighs your negative actions. If you do not, you get more chances to try again via reincarnation. Islam says that you have to obey Allah and follow his commandments, a similar understanding to our young friend.

B. We All Need a Sure Answer to the Question

He evidently strove to live according to the blessed OT Law as he followed the exhortation of his teachers. By his own not-altogether-modest admission, he did use his time to do good things. He helped others as he attempted to improve himself. Evidently, his contemporaries admired and respected him.

But there was something that caused him a bad case of discomfort. His guilty conscience was driving him crazy. It gnawed at him, pained him. That ruthless, honest self-appraisal was like a grinding, persistent refrain that taunted, “Not enough yet! You have not done enough yet! You are missing something. You are lacking!” If he were satisfied, he would not have sought out Jesus to ask his question.

And therein lies the problem. The wrong answer to this question can leave a person empty, longing, and with an aching heart and an accusing conscience. In a survey taken a few years ago, three out of four Lutherans said that they were trying to attain the ultimate gift of heaven and eternal life by “living good lives,” “obeying the commandments,” or being “good Christians.” But if we follow that approach, then we too will live sad lives, made desperate by a futile spiritual flailing in the wind. There will be no peace and no rest, as our conscience continues to point out what is lacking in our personal quest for eternal life. There will only be a struggle to find excuses within us why we feel lacking, empty, and far from our goal.

C. Jesus Alone Has the Answer

The rich young man heard of a rabbi by the name of Jesus, who performed miracles and taught about God with astounding authority. “I will go to him,” the man must have thought. “Perhaps he can give me insights that will lead me to inner peace and understanding!”

It is entirely possible that this young man had heard the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees about what is lawful (Mk 10:1–16). He may have heard Jesus say that people must become like little children to receive the kingdom of God! (10:13–16). But whatever he had heard, he was a man on a mission, searching honestly for the answer. Unlike the Pharisees, he is not trying to trick or trap Jesus. No, the man assumes that this rabbi actually has an honest answer, perhaps even the right one.

2. The Answer

A. God’s Love Produces the Answer

The evangelist Mark writes, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mk 10:21). What a beautiful moment for us, for it reveals the wonder, the breadth and depth of our Lord Jesus’ love for all people—even for those who don’t answer basic religious questions properly! What a relief! What a relief for any and all Lutherans who may not have gotten it right yet either!

This might also prompt us to react with more compassion and care and concern for well-meant people who have religious truths confused. It may encourage us to enter into more dialogue with them instead of condemning them. And it helps me to understand that the Lord Jesus will be patient with any of my misunderstandings! And with yours as well.

B. The Loving Answer is the Gospel

Then Jesus, still loving him—for Scripture does not tell us that Jesus loved him less for his misunderstanding of the way to salvation—looks him (and us) in the eye and says with a quiet voice, “One thing you lack . . . Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

With this word, the Lord Jesus reduces this man (and us) to absolute zero in terms of attempting to apply our good life towards the purchase of eternal life. We just can’t get it that way. We just won’t. And we thought we had kept the Law from our youth!

This moving story shakes us. This sobering dialogue drives us to the absolute bottom line of understanding who and what we are. It exposes our phony yet deeply-entrenched appraisal of ourselves as good, even though belief in our own goodness leads only to despair. Jesus pokes holes in our outwardly calm and stolid veneer as we admit to a besetting

anxiety while we approach our appointed final hour. Yeow!
The Law hurts!

Yes, the Law hurts—of necessity, so that we learn to let go of it for our salvation. For sinful humans—and that describes us all—keeping the Law is no way to arrive at eternal life, because we do not and cannot keep it. So the Law is no answer for us. The Law only drives us to the true answer: the Gospel. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The full answer is give by Jesus: “Come, follow me.”

Follow, to where? Where is Jesus going? He is going to the cross. There to perfectly fulfill the Law of God and give His life on our behalf. To suffer, bleed, die, and rise again from the dead. Jesus must die so that I can live. We follow Christ to the cross, see Him die and rise again, and we follow in that new life that He gives to us.

To follow is to understand that I am no longer in charge. I have given up control. There is Another who leads the way to eternal life. I will follow that One, and in following I am given a gift. The gift is being with Him forever in eternity. It is all caused by his grace, his love, his life, death, and resurrection. He invites us to follow him, and then he gives us the gift of being enabled through the Spirit’s power to do that!

To the question “What must I do?” there is but one answer: “Follow me.” The relationship of following is created by God’s grace through Jesus Christ.

It begins with a word from God in heaven, the Gospel, by which he calls us to be his own, unworthy though we are—a call that is seen perfectly in what Jesus, God’s Son, did for us and for our salvation.

What he did for us is all seen in his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus kept the Law perfectly. He did for us what we could not do. His perfect righteousness is given to us as a gift. By his death on the cross, he died for our transgression of God's Law, and we are thus freed from its condemnation. This is the Good News; this is the Gospel that saves. And by that Gospel we are called. The Spirit of God takes that call and by means of it enables us to follow Christ into eternity.

May the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.