

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
Sermon for Sunday, October 11, 2009
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is, simply, the wrong question to ask. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” That’s what the man comes asking Jesus in our text today. It’s wrong in a number of ways.

First, in just the way he addresses Jesus. “Good Teacher” He’s coming to Jesus not as Savior, not as Lord, not as the One who has redeemed him or who will redeem him and forgive him of his sins. He comes to Him as a teacher. Granted, he does put the adjective “good” there and addresses Him not just merely as a teacher that is among the ranks of others, but a *good* one. One that is solid, one that knows what He is talking about. And the man comes in that conviction, coming to Jesus, thinking that Jesus *does* have the answer to this question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” But if you really think about that question, just how wrong it actually is...

He has the phrase right. He has some of the words right. Eternal life *is* an inheritance, he’s got that down. But what he has mistaken is that he thinks he has to do something for it, or that he *can* do something for it. The nature of an inheritance is not that. An inheritance is a gift that is given, a gift that is handed-down, a gift that is just given as a gift - not as something that you earn, or something that you work for, or something that you do. But he comes asking that question. He knows that eternal life is something to attain. He knows it’s an inheritance. But he’s as wrong as all of us are in thinking that he must do something for it.

And so far in his life, he’s not figured out what he has to do to get that inheritance. So he comes to Jesus, as that good teacher, asking the wrong question.

Jesus answers him though. He doesn’t just ridicule him. In fact, He gives him a most profound answer. And in it, He gives him the Gospel, even though the man doesn’t see it.

First, Jesus addresses the way that the man comes to Him. The man comes, calling Him “Good Teacher”, and Jesus says, “Well, why do you call me ‘good’? No one is good except God alone.” As if to say, “If you’re coming to me as merely a teacher, as one who just holds an answer of what you have to do, you’re not coming to me as God. So why do you call me ‘good’?”

Second, He answers the question, and He says, “You know the commandments. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness, defrauding. And then honoring your father and mother. If you’re coming to me and asking what you

must do to have eternal life,” Jesus gives him the honest-to-goodness true answer, “Be perfect. Be good. Follow the 10 commandments.”

And Jesus doesn't even start at the first table, at those laws that we have keeping God above all others and honoring His name and honoring the Sabbath day. Jesus doesn't even go there to start. He goes right to that second table, to those laws that are horizontal, those laws that tell us how we are supposed to interact, what we are supposed to do for our neighbor. He goes there and He says, “Do these things, and then you'll have eternal life. It's really simple. Here is the law. God doesn't make any bones about it. He tells us what we are supposed to do. Follow it. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't bear false witness and don't defraud your neighbor. Don't take what is not rightfully yours. And lastly,” He says, “honor your father and your mother.”

With those words in his head, the man responds to Jesus, truthfully in his own mind, “Teacher, all of these I have kept from my youth.” He thinks that he actually *has* followed these laws, that he has followed all of these things that God commands and probably all of the laws that were added to it. And all of these different things that make us feel righteous, that make us feel as if we've done something for God - he thinks that he has done them. What a sad thing that is.

Jesus looks at him. He looks at him, full in his conviction that he has done all of these things, and Mark records that Jesus loved him. That's the striking thing about this text. Jesus looks at the man who is so wrong in his view of himself and of sin and He loves him. And what He does in loving him is He points him more back to his sin. He doesn't say, “Well, you're doing a good job. Keep trying and keep working.” He doesn't say that, “Yes, you're right. You're a good man in keeping all of these things, but there's something else.” Instead He loves him and he points to the one thing that the man lacks.

Loving the man, Jesus says 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.” This man thinks that he has kept that second table of the Law, that he has loved his neighbor as himself. And in his heart and in his mind, he *truly* thinks that he has done this. So

Jesus exposes the sin even greater. And He says, “If you have done all of these things, then go sell everything you have and actually give it to the poor and take care of them as you said you have done. And then come and follow me.” What a wonderful invitation to this man, to come and follow Jesus in His footsteps, to give up all of the cares of this world and to sit at Jesus' feet.

But the man doesn't do it, because he is not perfect. He has not kept all of these things that he thinks he has kept. And struck with his own sin, he turns around and he goes away. Disheartened, sorrowful.

Usually people don't leave Jesus in sorrow, at least not in the Bible. Usually people come to Jesus, stricken with their own sin, or their own error, or their own disease and they go away happy. This man doesn't, though. And that's the sad thing. Jesus loves him so

much that He shows him his sin, and the man can't take it. So he turns, and he goes away sorrowful.

See, it was the wrong question. That's where everything went wrong. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What must *you* do?" Jesus says. "Well, if you're asking that question, *you* must be perfect." The question that is asked of Jesus is a law question, and so Jesus gives a law answer. If you want to know what *you* can do *earn* eternal heaven, to earn an inheritance, Jesus tells us. "Be perfect. Don't sin. Be the one that is good." In essence, be God. "Be kind to your neighbor. Do all of these things. Give up all of your possessions and all that you have, and then you can have eternal life." But the man knows he can't. And so do we.

But the shocking thing is that we often think we do. Just like the man - and it's easy for us to look back and say, "How can he think that he keeps all of these things?" - but just like the man, we all answer somewhat the same way, thinking that there is some goodness in us that *does* keep these commandments.

Now, true, if we dig deep into ourselves and examine ourselves we all would admit that we sin, that we fall short of the glory of God, that we do not keep these 10 Commandments. But we want to. And we want to believe that we can, or at least that we can try and we *can* do good. Our sinful nature wants to lay claim to at least *some part of* being good. At least that we're better than others - and that's probably what this man really thinks. He probably thinks that, yes, he has not kept these all perfectly but he certainly has done it a *lot* better than the man next to him.

And that's the way that we all are. We like to think that our good works are what keep us in God's favor. We pray often, we go to church on Sundays, we read the Bible when we get the chance. And we like to think that that somehow *does* make us better. We like to think it makes us better fathers, mothers, children, grandparents. Better citizens than those that don't do all of these things. We like to think that we're better workers, better employers than those who do not have faith.

And perhaps, perhaps we are. Perhaps - by the grace of God - we are all those things, with God working in our hearts and knowing God's will, we do try. But the problem is that we take all of that effort and we start to make it our own prideful work. We stop thinking about the glory of God and the grace of God and how He can enable us to be better fathers and mothers and workers and employers. And we begin to think that there's something in it that we're doing, something that we're contributing to this. That we're the better man, that we know more than the other person, that we understand God and His will better.

And then pride takes a place in our heart, and we build ourselves up. What Jesus says to that is, "Go and get rid of it. Get rid of your possessions - whether they're money, whether they're pride, whether they're pride in your own works. Get rid of them, because they mean nothing, and come and follow me."

It's hard to do that. We don't do many good works, we all would admit that. So it's hard to give up those good works and say that it's not part of us or something that we do that is actually good. That God doesn't look at us and say, "Well you are a poor, miserable sinner, but at least you do *that*, so I look a little bit more in favor upon you."

It's hard for us to give that up, to give up those possessions that we have. But that's what God tells us to do. Because even all of our good works are rubbish. St. Paul, in one of his letters starts recounting all of the good works and all the things he has done. And when he gets to the end, he says, "I count it all as rubbish," is what our translations tell us. But what it actually is, in the Word, in the Greek, is he counts it all as dung, as nothing.

All of our good works, all of our pride, everything we have, all of our possessions - whether it's worldly possessions or even just our own prideful works - mean *nothing* to God. But He still loves us.

You see, it's the wrong question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" You don't do anything for an inheritance. It's something that you are born into, something that you are given. An inheritance is a gift that's given, not a wage that is paid. It's a treasure that is handed down because of the grace of the One who is giving. It's something that is yours because of *whose* you are, not who you are. Not because of what you have done or where you have placed yourself, but because of where God has placed you. You are born into an inheritance, you are born into the kingdom of God, you are born into eternal life because you are all sons of God.

Sons of God through your Baptism, sons of God through the Word that comes and tells you that while you are not perfect, while you are a poor, miserable sinner, Jesus has come and taken you. He has taken all your sins as He has taken you into Himself and made you an heir. Made you one who has that promise of the inheritance.

As Jesus says, "Only God is good." That is the key to all of this. Only God can keep those 10 Commandments and love His neighbor as Himself. To the point where He gives up all of His possessions and takes on human flesh. And takes on all of our sin, and gives us all of His treasure. Taking our sinful nature, taking our sinful flesh, becoming our very sin, going to the Cross, giving everything up - for us. That is how you get an inheritance. Not by the work you have done, not by the good things that you do. But as a pure gift of God, taking your place on the Cross, taking the punishment that we deserve.

What must you do? Nothing. Just receive the gifts of God. Don't reject it. Don't say that you don't want it. Sit there as the little child and receive the gifts of your Father. That's why we come here on Sundays. Not because we are good and it's a good thing to do. But because God is the One who is good and gives us His forgiveness. This is why we pray, not because we are good, but because God says, "Come to me and pray and I will give you all of these wonderful gifts." This is why we need the Word of God, not because we are good and somewhat better. But because Jesus is good and He gives you the gift of that Word.

He gives you the gift of His forgiveness. He gives you the gift of His place as the Son of God. And He takes your place as the sinner. That is the wonder of this text. "No one is good but God," and that is absolutely true. In and of ourselves we can never do anything to attain eternal life. But Jesus is the One who is good. Not just a good teacher who holds the answer of what we must do, but the One who is good and perfect and takes your place and gives you His place.

Next week, the answer to all of this is more fleshed out as the reading continues and Jesus talks to His disciples. And we'll see that next week. But for this week, we know that we have eternal life. Not as a wage, not as something that we have earned, but as an inheritance. As a gift that we have as our place where God has placed us. Born of Him. Born from above. And completely forgiven.

Now may this peace of God that surpasses all of our understanding, may it guard, may it keep our hearts and our minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.