

**October 11, 2015 – Mark 10:17-22 (OT: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 Epistle: Hebrews 3:12-19)**

*Salvation Comes Not From Doing Good But From the Only One Who is Good*

There are a number of reasons to admire the young man<sup>1</sup> who ran up to Jesus in our Gospel reading. Luke tells us that he was a ruler, meaning a ruler of the synagogue which he attended probably every Sabbath. He led an outwardly good and moral life. If you asked anyone who knew him who they thought would inherit eternal life, they would probably point to him.

Even though he lived almost two thousand years ago, he has a lot in common with the people we meet today. If you ask someone today why God should let them into heaven, they will probably say something like: “Because I’m a good person; I haven’t hurt anyone, or done anything really bad.”

This rich young ruler, however, had a feeling that his good life and leadership in the synagogue was not sufficient; he felt that he was still missing something, so he eagerly ran up to Jesus and humbly knelt before Him and asked, “*Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?*” (v. 10). Because of the heavenly power Jesus exhibited by casting out demons and healing the sick, and the wisdom with which Jesus spoke, this man was sure that Jesus had found the answer to eternal life. What this man did not understand, and what so many today do not see, is that Jesus Himself is the answer. Eternal life comes not from doing good, but from the only One who is good.

The answer Jesus gives this young man has often been misunderstood. The first thing Jesus said to him was: “*Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.*” Some people point to this answer as proof that Jesus is not God. They claim that Jesus is rejecting the man’s label of “good” because only God is good, and so Jesus is stating here that He is not God.

But that is not what Jesus is saying here at all! He is challenging the young man to consider what he really means by calling Him “Good Teacher.” Does this young man realize the implications of his words? Does he recognize that Jesus truly is good, because He is God? Instead of denying His Godhead, these words of Jesus actually assert it. He is asking the man, “Do you really mean what you say? Consider what that says about me!”

Then Jesus answers that man’s question by saying, “*You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’*” (v. 19). Here Jesus quotes what we call the “second table” of the law, commandments four through ten of the ten commandments. He summarizes the last two that speak against coveting with the words “*Do not defraud*”.

Is this the answer you were expecting? Is this what you would told the young man? Jesus seems to be saying here that one can inherit eternal life by doing good – by keeping the commandments. This would contradict Ephesians 2:8-9: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast*” and Galatians 2:16: “*a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ...for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.*” How do we reconcile what Jesus says here with these other verses, and with what Jesus has said at other times: that only those who believe in Him will have eternal life (for example: Mark 16:16, John 3:14-16)?

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1. see Matthew 19:20, 22.

First, Jesus answered the question as it was asked to Him: “*What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?*” If you want to earn eternal life by what you do, you have to keep the commandments. If you do all that God commands, and do it perfectly (see Matthew 5:48), then you will inherit eternal life.

The problem is, no human being has ever perfectly kept God’s law. Even stumbling on one point makes you guilty (James 2:10) and disqualifies you from eternal life. It’s all or nothing! And that is the second reason Jesus answered as He did. He turns to the Law to show this young man his sin and to show him that he needs a Savior. People usually need to hear the law first before they will listen to the gospel. They need to realize that they have sinned in order to appreciate the fact that Jesus has taken away their sin by dying in their place on the cross.

The man answered Jesus, “*Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth*” (v. 20). We know that he really hasn’t. None of us have kept all these commandments. But isn’t this the response we often hear from people today? When someone claims that they are a good person, they are saying the same thing as this young man did.

The problem is that the Jewish teachers, especially the Pharisees, reduced the commandments to something people could obey; they focused only on one’s external actions. The young man probably had not actually committed adultery, murder, stolen, born false witness against anyone, or defrauded anyone. He probably had outwardly honored his father and mother, at least as far as he could remember.

We may do the same thing. People often try to justify themselves by pointing out that they have not killed anyone or committed adultery, or done anything to hurt someone else either.

But Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount that God does not look merely at outward actions (Matthew 5:21-48). Lust and hatred go against God’s will just as much as actual adultery or murder. In Mark 7:14-23 Jesus explained that food does not defile a person, but what comes out of one’s heart (see sermon on Sept. 30, 2015). He said, “*What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man*” (Mark 7:20-23). If we consider what is in our hearts, we see that we have kept none of these commandments.

But Jesus does not bring any of this up. He doesn’t not directly challenge the young man’s claim to have kept the commandments He listed. Instead He tells the man: “*One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven*” (v. 21). Jesus loved him, and touched on the one area the man struggled with the most: his love of earthly possessions. While the young man perhaps had outwardly kept the commands regarding other people, he had broken the first and greatest of all the commands: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength*” (Mark 12:30). He loved his possessions more than he loved God. We are told that he “*went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions*” (v. 22). Evidently he was unwilling to part with them even for eternal life and treasure in heaven.

Is there anything in your life that you would be unwilling to give up? Is there anything or anyone that would cause you to walk away sad if Jesus told you to leave it or that person behind? That can be a painful question to consider. But it shows us the idols we have in our lives – the things or people that we love more than God.

But don’t misunderstand Jesus’ words here to mean that we all need to go sell whatever we have and give everything to the poor. This was a specific command to this young man, and a call for

*him* to repent of his idolatry and to show his repentance by selling what he has. The outward act of selling is not what was important, but the change in the man's heart.

This is also not a call for everyone who follows Jesus to live a life of poverty. Jesus did not require Zacchaeus to give up all his possessions, but Zacchaeus decided himself to give half of all his goods to the poor and pay back anyone he defrauded (Luke 19:1-8). Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Jesus in his tomb, was a disciple of Jesus and a rich man (Matthew 27:57). Ananias was not required to sell his field or to donate all the money from the sale (Acts 5:1-11). These examples show us that Jesus did not setup up a general principle here for all His disciples.

The problem was not the possessions or money itself, but in trusting in one's riches. Paul wrote to Timothy: "*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows*" (1 Timothy 6:10). That is probably one of the most mis-quoted verses in the Bible. It does not say *money* is the root of all kinds of evil, but *the love* of money. Again that brings us back to the first commandment: we are to love God above all things.

It is also important not to stop here with what Jesus told the young man. Jesus said: "*One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me*" (v. 21). This last part is key. Following Jesus is part of the "one thing" that the young ruler lacked. The man selling his possessions and giving them to the poor would not bring him eternal life – only believing and trusting in Jesus would.

The solution to our sin is not getting rid of the source of this or that particular sin (as helpful as that may be), but Jesus, the only One who is Good. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God's law and died to pay for your sins. You are justified not by what you do or avoid doing, but by what Jesus has done for you by His life, death and resurrection from the dead.

When you see your sin, do not go away sad and sorrowful, but turn from your sin to Jesus your Savior. He loves you and gave Himself up for you, so that your sins are forgiven and you will inherit eternal life. May you continue follow Him always. Amen.

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