



Lutheran Church of the Master
Pastors Wandrey and Kappus in a Shared Sermon
“FOR GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE!”
October 11, 2009 - Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ *As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* ¹⁸ *Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.*

Pastor Wandrey: We’re going to present this text differently than we ever have, with one pastor reading just a few verses and preaching on those verses, then the other pastor taking the next few verses, alternating through the text. We have not conferred with each other so it will either be another example of how two differing views and styles can still work well together or a display of the unity created by the Holy Spirit, or maybe both.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the rich man asked Jesus. That’s the bottom line. Everybody wants to have eternal life. To inherit it, you only have to be an heir. How do we get to be an heir? You’re either born into the family or adopted into it. In Holy Baptism we are both born anew into God’s family and adopted as God’s children. How then can we lose? We’ve got it made just because God has claimed us.

The rich man in today’s gospel text may have thought he could buy his way in, or even earn his way by obeying God and being good. Certainly God wants us to obey his word, but he knows we don’t; we all fall short. Jesus tells him, “No one is good but God alone.” We are all sinful; that’s why we need Jesus. That’s why God sent Jesus. The only way we will ever have eternal life is by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. God so loved the world, and everyone in it, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Since it’s not by being good, because we cannot be, then it can only be by knowing Jesus, who he is, what he has done for us, and what difference he makes for us. The current controversy facing our church is not about who is good and who is not; none of us is good; only God is good. I’m also convinced by what I’ve heard and read, it’s not about knowing Jesus. Everybody involved in this church conflict, regardless of their position, knows Jesus. Maybe it’s about how we see the commandments and God’s Word. Jesus addresses the commandments in the next few verses.

¹⁹ *You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’* ” ²⁰ *He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”*

Pastor Kappus: Now that Jesus has the young man’s mind fully engaged, Jesus told the young ruler what was necessary for eternal life: “You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother’” (v. 19)—“are you keeping the commandments?” This was the proper answer because the Old Testament taught that those who keep the Law will live (Deuteronomy 30:15ff.; cf. Ezekiel 33:15). The rabbis seriously spoke of people who kept the whole Law from A to Z, or more exactly Aleph to Taw.

Quite naturally, the rich young ruler reflected on Jesus' answer from the perspective of his own superficial understanding. He had not murdered, committed adultery, stolen, lied, or failed to honor his father and mother. Therefore he replied, "Teacher ... all these I have kept since I was a boy" (v. 20).

Jesus never lets us off that easily. You see, living by the Law can lead us to a black and white perspective on life...either you did or you didn't, either you have or you haven't. Jesus was constantly in the process of binding and loosing, a power he eventually gave to his church when he gave Peter the keys to the kingdom and said, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It was this same Jesus who set aside the 3rd commandment to heal a man's hand on the Sabbath and disregarded the ritual cleanliness laws by allowing his disciples to eat with unwashed hands – examples of loosing.

But he also made some things tighter and this, it seems to me, is where our young man runs into trouble. I'm sure none of us has killed, adulterated, stolen, lied or failed to honor our parents, either, right? But Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

And, of course, that old favorite..."You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Those, by the way, would be examples of binding, tight binding. So our young man doesn't yet realize it but he has put his foot in it now. The commandments Jesus has tossed his way are from the Second Table of the Law...those that have to do with our love of neighbor.

Someone said to me yesterday, after our conversation with Bishop Wells, "I'm not always sure about what's right and what's wrong but I'd like to think I know what's important." Our young friend in the text is yet to realize that there is more to life than just doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong. Life has never been that black and white. And it's seldom neat and clean, either. While doing the important work of following Jesus, he can lead us into some difficult and messy business...just how difficult? Let's find out.

²¹ *Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* ²² *When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

Pastor Wandrey: Mark writes, "Jesus loved the man," because he was sincerely trying to be the person God wanted him to be, except for one thing. He was more dependent upon his wealth, his possessions, than he was on Jesus. He could not give up what he had in order to follow Jesus. Is there one thing you cannot give up? Or a whole bunch of things? Who or what are you dependent on? Where are you willing to stake your life?

I hope, like the man in the text, all of us are sincerely trying to be the people God wants us to be. If we're not doing at least that, we're not really following Jesus. But that by itself is still not enough. Where is your heart; your commitment?

The decisions we're facing both as individuals and as a congregation may cause us to be uncomfortable. But Jesus does not call us to be comfortable. He calls us to love and to serve. Jesus told the man in the text to do something; to give up what was getting in his way, preventing him from following Jesus. It was too difficult for the man to do.

If we really are committed to Christ and want to follow him, we will be called to do difficult tasks; things we don't want to do. The man in the text walked away grieving. Which do you think was easier for him; to walk away or to follow Jesus? What will we do; walk away grieving or follow Jesus? The next few verses tell us just how hard it can be for us.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Pastor Kappus: We do ourselves a disservice if we water down Jesus' words. The Babylonian Talmud contains quotations regarding elephants passing through the eye of a needle, illustrations of impossibility. Jesus' reference to a camel, the largest beast in Palestine, being thrust through, humps and all, was readily understood as a humorous illustration of the impossible. This same proverb is current among the Arabs today. Jesus categorically says it is impossible for a man or woman who trusts in riches to get into Heaven.

Mark says the disciples were even "more amazed" at these words— overwhelmed, "struck outside themselves." Why? Because they believed in an ancient rendition of "prosperity theology" taught by the rabbis, who used Old Testament passages to equate God's blessing with material prosperity, and taught that the rich could build up future merit and reward for themselves by giving to the poor. To the Jewish mind it was inconceivable that riches could be a barrier to the Kingdom.

Protestantism has frequently been afflicted with the same kind of errant thinking. Historically some of our ancestors twisted Reformed theology so as to make economic prosperity evidence that they were the elect. Today we see this in the crass materialism of the "name it and claim it" school of religion and similar embarrassments for the Church in the eighties.

We need to hear what Jesus was really saying, and to hear it well: wealth can be handicap!

Note that I said *can be*. Jesus was not making a case for all of us, everyone who follows him, to give up all wealth and live a life of conscious and constant denial. This Scriptural word...sell everything you have and give it to the poor...is for this particular young man. The Old Testament holds up some godly rich men (such as Abraham and Boaz and Job) as examples, though it constantly guards and warns against the greed of the rich. Tertullian, the Apostolic Father, was right when he called it irreligious to scorn this wonderful world and refuse to enjoy

God's bounty and thank him for it. He says: "It was goodness, goodness, goodness that made it all." We are right to enjoy it.

I also don't think that Jesus was recommending poverty to his people, because poverty does not deliver one from the love of money. As George MacDonald said: "It is not the rich man only who is under the dominion of things; they, too, are slaves who, having no money, are unhappy for the lack of it... The money the one has, the money the other would have, is in each the cause of an eternal stupidity."

The fact is, wealth can be, mark that again, *can be* spiritually beneficial. It can teach us the hollowness of things, and if used for Christ can enhance one's spiritual growth—a benefit which, sadly, too few experience. For the disciples, as they watched the rich young man trudge slowly away, it was one of those "teachable moments"—and Jesus grabbed it. No doubt his words brought other things to mind for his disciples of that day as they do for his disciples of today.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount he warned: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19–21)

He also said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24; cf. Luke 16:13).

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a dramatic warning about this matter (Luke 16:19–30). The same is true of the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21). There is a proper "Christian fear" of being rich.

The greatest disadvantage of wealth is what it can do to the soul. How easy it is for people with good intentions to become so attached to material riches that they forget what is infinitely more important.

Paul tells Timothy, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant" (1 Timothy 6:17). Pride, arrogance, insensitivity, indifference, self-satisfaction, worldliness, and other ungodly mind-sets feed on affluence.

Most tragic, wealth can steel one against the one basic requirement for entering the Kingdom of God: helpless dependence. I think this is what Jesus was getting at prior to our text with the little children. Innocent faith and helpless dependence. Are we capable of either?

²⁶ *They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"* ²⁷ *Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."*

Pastor Wandrey: Who can be saved? Jesus makes it sound impossible! And for us, it is impossible. But for God, all things are possible! God created an incredible world, a whole universe, and we humans are the pinnacle of his creation; just a little lower than the angels, and in the image of God himself. So important are we to God, that he sent his Son to save us, because we could never save ourselves.

So what will we do with ourselves, this creation of God's, so important to him that he redeemed us who were lost? I said up front, it's not about being good; we're not! Only God is. The best we might do is give up whatever is holding us back and keeping us from following Jesus. We need to be committed to Jesus. And if so, then also to doing the ministry to which he has called us.

God brought us all to this congregation. We have given much to the ministry here; some for a longer time than others. But this ministry has been a major part of how we live out our commitment to Jesus Christ. Even if it looks like an impossible situation for us to continue this ministry in this congregation, for God all things are possible. Whether LCM remains with the ELCA, as some of you want to see happen, or not, as others want to see; we can continue this ministry here if we will do it together.

I had a dream last night that involved two members of LCM who have gone to their eternal home, Dorm and Gretchen Riemann, whom many of you knew. Years ago, they left a congregation they loved because of a sex issue; a different kind of sex issue, but sex was the issue nevertheless. They came to this congregation and though I can't be sure, maybe the reason I had this dream is that I don't think they would allow another sex issue to make them walk away again. They would not want again to see their church hurt and its ministry weakened. I don't think any of us want to see that, either. So let's figure out what God wants for us; it's not impossible. Because for God all things are possible.

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Pastor Kappus: My dear brothers and sisters, here we come to the end of it and there is such good news. I believe that these verses lead us into the great unity that we have in Christ. Do you see it? G. Campbell Morgan in his commentary on Mark from 1927 says it as well as anyone: "One house gone; but a hundred doors are open! One brother in the flesh lost; but a thousand brothers in the spirit, whose love is deeper and whose kinship is profounder."

Were I to be in dire need of a place to stay, how many of you would hesitate to offer me shelter? If I needed the support and comfort of family, who among you would not offer a sympathetic ear or the hand of friendship? If I was without food and starving, could I not turn to you, my brothers and sisters, for aid? Whatever we might give up to follow Jesus, he returns to us in abundant measure. Not that it will be without trials and tribulations...he makes that clear as well (even though Mark is the only writer who makes that addition). And yet we always have the confident hope...hope with faith in Jesus...that at the end of it all comes eternal life.

Peter begins this conversation with an almost begging expectancy but he apparently doesn't get to finish. It sounds like he wants to set himself and the other disciples up as deserving of some reward for their faithfulness and dedication. And then, after assuring the disciples that commitment to him and faithfully following will bring their appropriate rewards, he places them

firmly back in the position of service to their neighbor. There is a word of both law and gospel in this saying of Jesus which both Matthew and Luke also record but in different contexts.

Let me clarify what we Lutherans mean by law and gospel. First of all, Luther sets the whole understanding of God's revelation to God's people first in the person of Jesus Christ and secondarily in a text. Jesus is God for us. The Bible, in turn, is the story of the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and a proclamation of salvation offered freely to humans redeemed by grace. So for Luther, what shows us Jesus in the Scriptures communicates God's favor; what does not, shows us only human weakness and limitation and judgment. The first (wherever we find it) is gospel; the latter is law.

If you are the rich young ruler or a middle-class working American or a presumptuous disciple like Peter, this can be heard as a word of law, rendering inadequate all our false assumptions about wealth and privilege and tradition as things in which to trust. The first shall be last. If you are a poor fisherman who left it all to follow Jesus or a family struggling to break the cycle of poverty or someone who has been excluded and ostracized from the mainstream, this can be heard as a word of gospel grace, freeing us to cross boundaries and walls with the message of a God whose grace has no limits. The last shall be first. It speaks to all of us wherever we are. If we are rich and powerful, it calls us to part with some of the wealth and influence on behalf of the poor and weak. If we are the hopeless and hurt, the weak and heavy-laden, it calls out hope to us in that Jesus will give us rest and bring it to us in the hands and hearts of our neighbors.

Or to put it another way, in perhaps his greatest miracle of binding and loosing, Jesus takes all of the Law and the Prophets and distills them to these two commandments: Love God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul and your neighbor as yourself. We, of course, cannot love God so completely but Jesus can and so he binds us to himself in baptism so that we are loosed from the demands of the law. In this way, we are now free to bind ourselves to the needs and consciences of our neighbor at Christ's command so that they might be loosed from their bondage and come to know Jesus.

Sometimes that's messy and sometimes that's difficult. But that is the nature of being the body of Christ in the world. It is the task and the privilege to which we are called. Amen.