

Sermon: never good enough

Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16

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Do we really have to give away all our possessions in order to qualify for entering into the Kingdom of God? Is this not what Jesus tells the rich young man who comes to him?

Imagine, no house. No land. No car. No pension. No insurance. No iPhone. No laptop. No TV. No fridge. That would be awful. Welcome to the life of 50% of the world's population!

No, we do not like that.

But we are Christians, we want to follow Jesus Christ, so we have to listen seriously to what Jesus tells us.

1. Who knows our heart? "what must I do?"

That rich young man had a similar desire. He came with a good attitude to Jesus. He wanted to please God, and wanted to be sure that he would be part of Gods kingdom.

We have to ask ourselves the same question. What to do.

Well, in fact, like that young man, we not only have to ask ourselves, we have to ask Jesus. He knows better than anyone else what God wants from us. He is the Great Expert as He is part of God himself.

The young man was rich; he came from the upper class of Israel. For him to run to Jesus and to kneel before him, was in fact rather embarrassing. If you are a man of quality and standing, you do not run. You do not kneel before anyone. Only for God.

The fact that the young man ran and knelt, shows that he had an urgent question, and he knew that Jesus had the power to answer his question.

'What must I do to inherit eternal life', he asked.

What does this question mean?

The inheritance he refers to, is the promise of God that began with Abraham, that his posterity would live safely and securely in the land of God. Even in the time of Jesus, this was the dream of the Jews - restoration, health, the good life with the Messiah in the Kingdom of God.

The term 'eternal life' that the man uses, does not refer to a life in the clouds, but to the life of the coming age of perfection and goodness, when God makes all things well.

'Lord, what must I do to be sure that I am part of the promise, that I will be part of that renewed world?'

Jesus does not immediately answer - he seems to challenge the frame of mind of the man. "Why do you call me good? Only God is good...'

This should have made the young man think... He knew that Jesus was truly good... and indeed, only God is truly good. How can this be?

And also, if no man is good, how then can anyone enter into this Kingdom of Truly Goodness? Certainly not on the basis of us being good - because we are not.

Jesus showed his divinity by the fact that he knew that young man inside out. He knew with absolute clarity where for this young man the painful spot was. Where he was less than good.

Our Lord knows us, inside out. You cannot hide your problem areas from him. For each other, surely we keep up appearances. With our Lord, we will never succeed.

2. The one who knows is gracious, a high priest

Is this a scary idea?

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read about this all-penetrating knowledge of God of our lives. Listen again:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden,

but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

What is this word of God? It is like a sword as sharp as a razor blade - able to go deep into your mind. It is able to judge the thought and intentions of your hearts.

I have so often heard people use these words about the bible, as if these verses speak about the bible, and that the bible gives us insight in our own hearts. I think this is a serious mis-reading of these verses.

The Word of God is Jesus Himself. Listen carefully again: 'The Word of God is living and active... and before HIM no creature is hidden... to whom we must render an account.

Jesus knows us inside out; he is God's Word. The Word of God is not an impersonal book, but Jesus Christ himself. We listen to Him to hear God speak. We do not render an account to the Bible, but to Jesus Christ.

And when Jesus speaks to that young man, he reveals that he has this penetrating insight. He knows that the young man has areas in his life that are not good yet.

His words pierce the heart of the young man, and Jesus judges the thoughts and intentions of his heart.

For doing this in our lives today, He uses, surely, the written words of God, and he uses the wisdom and insight from other people. He also uses your own mind. And in all this the Holy Spirit is at work, given to his church and to you to know the will of God and to know what to do.

And it is very important to see that when God pierces our hearts and intentions, when He searches our inside, when he looks at us, and when he reveals us our own weaknesses.... he does this not to condemn you but to heal you. To make you whole.

Because immediately in the letter to the Hebrews, the writer put this knowledge of God of our weaknesses, in a beautiful light:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet

without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

3 Obedience is tough, but God makes it possible and blesses us

The young man wanted to hear from Jesus what he had to do to please God, but the answer did not please him at all.

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.

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away sadly, for he was rich. Instead of approaching the throne of grace, he just left.

Jesus did not say that he was bad through and through, as some people like to paint mankind. In fact, Jesus was satisfied that the man obeyed God. There was just this one area where the man did not... Jesus knew this exactly. But this did not mean all was black. It meant he had to work on that one area.

As we all have areas in our life that are not good and that need attention. Those areas show us that we do depend on the grace of God for our eternal salvation. Our own goodness does not help us much because no-one is absolutely good.

But these dark spots do not mean that we are totally dark.

To realise this is important not only for our relationship with God, but also for how we look at others and at ourselves. Of course we are sometimes confronted with bad, rotten aspects of others. But that does not make that whole person bad. No-one is total-loss.

And we detect often enough black spots in ourselves. And we must be serious about this. Its bad enough. But it does not mean that we have to conclude that we are totally rotten. It means we have areas in our life that need work. But other areas in our life are fine.

That is actually a very liberating idea for people who grew up hearing sermon upon sermon saying that there is nothing good about mankind, that all is darkness. But we are made in Gods image! Now sin has marred some of God's image in us - but we are still made in the image of God.

You are a wonderful person. There is work to do, and we will never be perfect. But you are wonderful as you are - just with a few warts and wrinkles. But you are the crown of creation. God's own handiwork. His child.

We must work on what is not good yet - but not in order to enter into God's kingdom. That Kingdom of the Perfect God we can never enter based on our perfection. As we are not.

This is underlined by what happens next in the story...

Peter began to say to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

Jesus agreed with this, they had done this. But would this be enough for them to enter into His kingdom? No of course. If it would be enough, Jesus would not have to suffer and die for the sins of all of us.

The fact that the 12 disciples had left their business and followed Jesus did not give them easier access into the Kingdom of God than any other obedient believer in Jesus Christ.

And mind you, the disciples had not sold all they owned...Peter had a house in Capernaum, he had a fishing boat... and Paul had his equipment for making tents, while Jesus and his disciples used Judas to keep their money, so they did have assets as well.

We must work seriously on our character and serve God. And maybe for many this is related to how we deal with money. Is money more important than God himself? You only proof that this is not so, is by being exceedingly generous, and that is part of the lifestyle of every Christian.

Our heart must be focused on God, and every possession must be yielded to God. Not just 10%. All belongs to God and we are his stewards of all he gives to us.

For the young man this was too much. He lost all hope. He had not carefully considered the words of Jesus. When we see imperfections in us, we do not need to give up hope. Much is good in your life, and God forgives what is not perfect yet. Had the young man grasped that Jesus is the welcoming high priest, he would have enjoyed staying with Jesus. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him".

But the young men focussed more on his own faults than on the love and forgiveness of the good God.

The disciples also did not grasp this immediately.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

Again, it seems Jesus wanted to make his friends think whether obeying rules could bring people into the Kingdom.

The disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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."

Jesus raises the bar very high now. If people have possessions, it is so hard to obey God. We tend to put material wealth, the things we own, before God. And thereby we transgress against the first commandment, that we are to serve and love God alone.

No wonder the disciples were astonished. "Then who can be saved?" Exactly. Now they get it.

The rich young man for a moment thought that salvation is by obeying the commandments. And the disciples thought along similar lines.

But now Jesus made clear - no way! Because only God is good. We human are not never good enough. Jesus says:

For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.

Those who by faith are attached to Jesus Christ are thereby part of God's Kingdom. Because by being attached to Him we are attached to the perfectly Good One.

And sure, our loving Lord knows what still needs work in our life. He forgives, he heals, he helps us to move on.

And sometimes that process of honestly looking at our imperfections -our sins - can be painful, and the process of change can be painful. But it comes with a blessing.

The young man wanted to know how he could enter into the eternal kingdom that was promised to Abraham. Jesus says: be with me. Be with me.

And the promise:

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, 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.

Amen