

Sermon 10-11-09<sup>1</sup>  
Hebrews 4:12-16  
Mark 10:17-31  
Priorities

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a seemingly simple question asked by a man who runs up to Jesus as he is walking with his disciples. While we might wonder why this man comes running up to Jesus, what prompts him to go to Jesus, throwing himself at his feet; Jesus, for his part, doesn’t really seem to be surprised by this man’s actions but offers the standard rabbinical answer, “You know the commandments.” And in a seemingly hurried fashion the man informs Jesus that he has kept all of these since his youth; since the time in his life when he was made aware of the commandments and welcomed within the full circle of the community of faith. For all intents and purposes, it would seem that this man is lacking nothing in his life. He keeps the commandments; he follows the religious requirements as closely as a person can. Yet here we see a man who in every way is very representative of who we are; who reflects the heart of our insecurities, our anxieties, our perpetual concern about something we want to control and keep track of.

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“Good teacher, what must *I do* to inherit eternal life?” Buried beneath the surface resides a deep concern over his life; not just a concern about where he is “going” after he dies, but what the make-up of his life will be in the here and now. Yet, we might ask, following the commandments as closely as he does, why is he still wracked by insecurity and anxiety; why does guilt play into his question? Surely there must be something lurking beneath the surface of his life that brings this question to the surface. Surely there is a sense of longing in this man, something that is left unfulfilled despite his best efforts to achieve the inheritance of eternal life. Within the life of this man we see ourselves reflected. We see our yearning for things eternal, our yearning for a sense of security, our yearning for what lies beyond our grasp and we join our yearning to this man’s question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What must *I do* to find security, what must *I do* to be relieved of the present anxieties, what must *I do* to find the relief of guilt, what must *I do* to find reprieve from the burdens and responsibilities that weigh upon me: what must *I do* to know and find the assurance of salvation, to know I’m saved, to know that God loves me, to know that I am forgiven? What must *I do*?

With the man in our gospel lesson, we're good people for the most part. In our own and varied ways, we keep the commandments. We don't steal, we don't cheat, we don't defraud, we aren't murderers, we don't commit adultery, and we don't bear false witness with those around us. With the man, we want to pat ourselves on the back with the knowledge that we keep these commandments for the most part. And yet lurking there beneath the surface is this anxiety: What must *I do*? With the man in our gospel lesson, we stand before Jesus asking what must *I do* to inherit eternal life; and in that man's place we hear Jesus' response, "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." With the man, we wonder what we must do to inherit eternal life, and with the man we respond to Jesus' words shocked and grieving, pretending he never uttered them, because we have many possessions. In asking, "what must *I do*" we discover that we're set up for failure, for like the man, we can't live into the demand that Jesus makes. We don't really know how.

In response to Jesus' bold and trying words, even his disciples cannot wrap their minds around what their Good Teacher has said. In their way of viewing things, wealth and possessions are considered to be blessings by

God; not that someone who has more is more blessed, but that through and through whatever you have is a blessing by God. Even Jesus' disciples, hearing how difficult it is for anyone to inherit eternal life – to enter the kingdom of God – can't help but asking, "Then who can be saved?" In the end, it's the disciples who take up the man's initial question, "What must I do," getting to the heart of the matter by asking how anyone can be saved according to the strict and narrow view that Jesus himself offers. Can we hear how destructive this thinking is? Salvation is not something we do, it's not something we inherit, and it's not something we can somehow work our way into. "What must I do to inherit eternal life" is the wrong question as Jesus himself suggests, it's impossible for human beings. The more startling and earth-shaking reality that Jesus leads us to is to ask what the Lord God Almighty is doing about the salvation of the world and how is he inviting us to get in on that?

The assumptions we bring to this passage often makes hearing it correctly quite difficult for us. We often view this passage as Jesus' condemnation of wealth and possessions, which hits pretty close to home for those of us living in North America. But the fact of the matter is Jesus does not condemn the rich man for his wealth and possessions; he

confronts the priority structures within his life to open him up to the reality of the kingdom of God. “Lacking on thing” according to Jesus, is not about the possessions of this man, or our own, it’s a question of priorities – or better yet *the* priority in life. The wealth and possessions of the man in this scripture passage are his stumbling block for following Jesus because he places priority in them. But it could have just as likely have been his family or his friends, or something of the like. The selling of his possessions is not a condemnation of his wealth; it’s a condemnation of the value and priority the man places upon his possessions rather than the value of knowing and following Jesus in a powerful and life changing way. In short, this passage is about the priority structures in our lives.

We often think that the life of discipleship is about what “I do” to get right with God, forming a list of do’s and don’ts that “I” then follow to somehow petition God to like me and to condition God into giving me the blessing of eternal life when death comes calling. Jesus turns this way of thinking upside down by stressing that it’s not about following a list of instructions, it’s not about devoting ourselves to a list of essential tenets or assuming that somehow we can affect God in such a way that he will give us the inheritance of eternal life. Along the way, our priorities get mixed up

because we spend so much time focusing on what we're doing towards our salvation that we never spend enough time looking at what Jesus is doing in our midst out of the freedom of his love and power. For human beings, salvation is impossible. But for God, for the love of the Father revealed to our hearts and minds by Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, we come to know that all things are possible – no one is forsaken or beyond saving, because of the depths of God's love for the world revealed in, through, and as Jesus Christ through the prism of his cross and resurrection. This works not only on an individual level but also for the life of the church.

One of the biggest challenges we are facing as a church is an inversion of our priorities. We often ask, what can I do, what can we do to grow the church. What can we do to deepen the church spiritually, what can we do to get more people for pray, what can we do to get folks more involved, what can we do to make this church more successful. Can you hear how destructive this way of thinking is? It has nothing to do with what we do; rather it has everything to do with what Jesus is doing, right now, as the apostle and high priest of our confession leading his church in Emsworth. Every time we try to seize the reigns of control away from God

and set ourselves up in his place, we fail even before we begin. When we get Jesus wrong, when we forget who our Lord and Savior is, we get life wrong and we get the life of the church wrong.

What Jesus calls for within this passage is a complete reorientation of our priorities. Not that we place Jesus at the top of our priority lists, as if he is among all the other priorities in our lives; rather Jesus calls us to recognize that he is the list. As Lord and Savior we are called to follow him, to consider Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession over all other things in our lives and the life of the world. We're called to follow this Jesus, who doesn't stand far off from us unable to sympathize with our weaknesses and losses, but has penetrated to the depths of them out of the freedom of his love and power to be tested in every way, as we are, yet without sin. Because of what he has accomplished on our behalf, in his vicarious humanity healing the pain and destruction of sin, taking our anxieties, our insecurities, and our guilt into himself to bend back the will of humanity as God for the purposes of God; because he has done all of this as God-for-us, securing the inheritance of eternal life in himself for us, he calls us to radically orient our lives upon his reigning life. Because of all he has accomplished on our behalf, joining us in union with his risen and

reigning life, he is continually working within our lives to reveal to us the reality that he is the way, the truth, and the life; he is the only real and true priority in our lives, so much so, that when we consider Jesus, and him alone, everything else falls into place.

The time has come to stop thinking about what we must do to inherit eternal life, what we must do to grow the church, or what we must do to be in a good place with God. When we do that we will continually lack one thing. Rather, be secure in the knowledge that Jesus, our crucified, risen, and reigning Lord frees you from this burden, laying hold of you and binding you in union with himself, forgiving your sins so that you might recognize the continual presence of his grace in your life, sealing you in the knowledge that with him at the center, with him in control, with him as *the priority* nothing and no one is beyond the reach of his care and his salvation. This ain't no pipe dream: it's the wisdom of the Lord God Almighty, known in the flesh of Jesus our Savior. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.