

## Mark 10:17-22

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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One Thing

The Word of the Lord from Mark 10:21: "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said 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 is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

He's a man with great possessions, he's very respectful of Jesus and I'm guessing that he's a nice, sincere guy; but he's just asking the wrong question.

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

What must *I do*? You know the answer in a nutshell: *you* can't do anything – you're saved by grace, not by works. Jesus, however, teases this out a bit so that the man might acknowledge his sin. He says, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone." It's an important start, with Jesus raising two important points. For one, if Jesus is truly good and no one is good but God alone, then Jesus is indeed God. For another, if no one is good except God alone, then the man *isn't* good. He can't do what it takes to inherit eternal life, because that would mean keeping all of God's Law *always* and *perfectly*.

This explains the track that Jesus takes. Since the man has asked a Law question, he gets a Law answer: "You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" Jesus doesn't list seven of the Ten Commandments to give the man any hope that he can do it. He's essentially saying, "I know you what you're thinking: you're thinking, 'If I keep these, I will live forever.'" This is exactly what the man is thinking, and now he thinks that Jesus is giving him the confirmation he's hoping for, so he says, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

Now, you know that he hasn't kept all of these from his youth. You've heard the Sermon on the Mount before. You know that to keep the commandment, "Do not murder," is to never even be angry, *ever*; and you know that to keep the commandment, "Do not commit adultery," is to never even have a sexually impure thought, *ever*. When the man says, "I have kept all of these," what he really means to say is, "I've kept all of these to *my* satisfaction – I've met my standards." But Jesus has already established that this man is not good – and therefore his standards are not good enough, ever.

There's also a glaring omission to the conversation. It's missing three commandments, namely the first three: "You shall have no other gods," "You shall not misuse the Lord's name," and "Remember the Sabbath Day." The seven commandments on the man's mind are all about how he treats other people: essentially, his faith is, "As long as I'm good enough to my neighbor, then God will save me." But his faith doesn't ask, "Am I good enough to God? Do I make proper use of His name? Do I honor and obey His Word? Do I have any other gods?"

*If* you're going to try to save yourself by keeping the Ten Commandments, then you've got to be honest and have all ten in play; so Jesus brings the first three commandments into the conversation with this: "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."

Note that Jesus says this because He loves the man. He wants this man in the kingdom of heaven. He's going to the cross to die for this man's sins. He's not out to push the man away, but to show him that he's looking at salvation the wrong way.

Jesus also isn't demonizing wealth. Some have used this text to argue that Christianity demands a vow of poverty, because Jesus tells the man that he must sell all that he has in order to follow Him. But the man's wealth itself isn't the problem: the problem is that the man has made his wealth to be a false god. Remember how the *Small Catechism* explains the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods." What does this mean? "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things." That means that a false god is something – anything – that we fear, love and trust more than God.

When Jesus tells the man to sell all that he has, He's telling the man to measure his holiness by the First Commandment, rather than the last seven. If it comes down to one or the other, does the man love Jesus more than his great possessions – or does he fear losing his possessions more than he loves and trusts Jesus? The Law demands that the choice be made.

The man's reaction makes it clear: if he has to choose between one or the other, he's going to opt for his possessions and say goodbye to Jesus. He prefers his false god and the enslavement it brings, to the true Son of God who stands before him with freedom from sin and death.

Jesus has just made clear that the man hasn't kept the Law from his youth, but here's where many get the meaning of this text wrong. What's the solution to the man's predicament? Must he sell all that he has and give it to the poor to be saved in order to pass the test? That doesn't work, because that would mean he's saved by his financial sacrifice, not by Jesus' sacrifice. Even if he did sell everything, he's still unholy – he's got this false god on his permanent record, and he hasn't really kept any of the other commandments from his youth, either.

The problem in our Gospel lesson is that the man asks a Law question and then goes away without the Gospel. Jesus isn't looking for poverty: He's looking for repentance. The hope is that the man says, "Huh. I haven't kept the Law, and I can't do it. I need You to save me, Jesus, because I can't save myself. Have mercy on me and forgive me." But the man won't repent: being saved rather than saving himself never crosses his mind, and so he goes away sorrowful.

Imagine, though, that the man repents. Imagine that he praises Jesus for pointing out his idol and confesses his sin. What happens? Jesus forgives him. What of his wealth? He's welcome to keep it and use it in God-pleasing ways, as long as it doesn't become an idol again. But if he's tempted to worship his riches, it's far better to enter heaven penniless than to enter hell with a ton of money in the bank and not a single ATM to be found in the outer darkness.

The man asks the wrong question. He asks how to be saved by the Law, and so Jesus tells him what he must do to be saved by the law. He can't do it: that's what Jesus is trying to tell him. But rather than trust in Jesus, he goes away sorrowful.

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You and I understand the Law better than the Gospel. For one thing, the Law is written on your heart: that's why your conscience is poking you about your sins, even when you've covered them up from everybody else. One might even say that the Law is part of you. For another, the Law makes sense: it makes sense that if you do enough good things, then good things should happen. If you do bad things, then bad things should happen to you.

That, of course, is a watered-down version of God's Law. God's Law gets rid of "shoulds" and "good enoughs" and other half-measures and simply says this: If you are holy, then you will go to heaven. If you are unholy, then you're condemned.

By nature, you prefer the watered-down version – because by nature, you're already unholy and thus condemned before you even consider the question. Here is where your old Adam is always goading you to imitate the man in this text. Sure, you're supposed to keep God's Law and not sin; but of course, we all know that that's just impossible. With that in mind, your sinful nature wants you to focus on one of two possibilities.

The first is that Jesus is exaggerating, that He *really means* something else. This is a popular form of biblical interpretation these days, when people have the gall to say, "I know what Jesus said, but it's not what He really *means*. I'll tell you what Jesus really means." When someone says this, the implication is that Jesus is awkward with His words and thus needs us to make up for His lack of clarity. Sinful pride has no limit.

And your sinful nature *is* proud, so it tempts you to say, "When Jesus says that you have to keep His commandments, He really means that you need to keep them to your satisfaction. When you feel you have done your best, then He will be satisfied with your efforts too." It boggles my mind that so many people trust that they are going to heaven because they have done their best. Imagine someone who says, "God must be pleased with me because I'm doing my best and doing better: after all, I might still be murdering and committing adultery quite a bit, but I'm murdering and fornicating less than I used to." Would we call him holy? Hardly. Yet daily you'll be tempted to believe that your efforts must satisfy God because your efforts satisfy you. When you fall for that, you've put yourself on the same level as God when it comes to judging. This means that you trust yourself as much as you trust God; and it goes without saying that you love yourself as much as you love God. So when it comes to the First Commandment, your possessions aren't your most dangerous idol. You are. This does not earn you God's pleasure and eternal life. It merits His wrath and eternal judgment.

If you don't fall for that, then your sinful nature prods you to the other possibility: Jesus is cruel. No matter how hard you try, it's never good enough for this Jesus: He'll always find some other sin you're committing, some other Law you're failing to keep. It's just like the man in the Gospel lesson: he's worked so hard at keeping so many commands, and this Jesus goes and digs up another one that he hasn't been keeping. This is blatantly unfair, says your sinful nature: if all that this Jesus is going to do is point out all of your faults, then maybe you should look for a different Savior. In other words, like the man in the text, your sinful nature wants you to walk away.

Take note: your sinful nature wants you saying, "I'm living up to my standards, so Jesus must be delighted with me – and if He's not, that's His problem and I'm going to walk away." The idea here is death by distraction: as long as you're torn between these two options, then you're ignoring the truth that you've only got half the message. See, Jesus keeps telling you that no matter how hard you try, it's never good enough because ... no matter how hard you try, it's never good enough. You can't make yourself holy; and when you confess that truth, then you're ready for the rest of what Jesus has to say. Rejoice, because He's got a lot more to say.

Namely, Jesus has saved you by living out the Law that you couldn't. All those commandments that the man recites, like "Don't murder," "Don't commit adultery," etc.? Jesus kept those perfectly, in thought as well as Word and deed. As far as those first three commandments about loving God, He honored His Father all the way to crucifixion. As far as His command to sell all and give to the poor, well, you've got this word from 2 Corinthians 8:9: "For

you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich." For whose sake? Yours, that you might have treasure in heaven.

As Jesus said to the man, so He says to you: apart from Him, "You lack one thing." He's right: by nature, you lack holiness, and there's nothing you can do to get it. That's why Jesus came and lived and died and rose again. What must you do to inherit eternal life? Nothing. It's been done by Him, and He gives it to you. Don't *do*, but *be*: be His.

Be redeemed, for He has redeemed you.

Be holy, for He declares you holy.

Be forgiven, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen