

Follow to the Finish

In the name him who truly is our Good Teacher, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel gives us the account of Jesus' conversation with a rich young man – a rich young man about whom we can infer a few things. First, that though he has heard glowing reports of Jesus and so holds him in high regard, he has nevertheless not spent much if any time actually listening to Jesus teach. If he had, he would know how Jesus raised the bar on all the commandments equating anger with the sin of murder and impure thoughts with the sin of adultery, for example. No one ever came away from a Jesus sermon feeling they had kept even one of God's commandments. This guy imagines he's kept them all. In other words, he's obviously not a Lutheran.

We can also infer that this young man is used to a life of privilege – which in turn might explain why he hasn't spent any time hearing Jesus teach. Why would he? He's not going to stand amid crowds of the unwashed masses straining to hear an itinerant preacher on some hillside or beach in Galilee. He hasn't got time for that. Besides, he finds the common people beneath his station in life to be rather icky. He's not going to hang out with them. No, he wants a private audience with the famous Rabbi Jesus and a quick and simple answer to his question – like he's used to getting from his servants and the merchants who want to do business with him.

Still, he supposes a little flattery and a show of respect (condescending to treat Jesus almost as if he were an equal) might help him get the simple answer he seeks. Thus he prefaces his question by addressing Jesus as "Good Teacher". Jesus, who very much has a Lutheran understanding of mankind's sinful condition, asks him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Jesus is not here denying being either good or God. He's both. He is instead beginning to derail the young man's underlying assumption that he himself is an essentially good person.

But then to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies with the standard Law answer. Keep the commandments. Do this and live.

"Yes, yes, I've managed all that. I was a good little boy and never stopped." And yet ... and yet he feels compelled to ask the question, which suggests that there's some nagging doubt there, some sense that maybe he hasn't done enough. What he wants is to be sure. So if only there were some task to perform, some mission to accomplish, some charity to which he could donate ... nothing too big, mind you; nothing that would interfere in any substantial way with his comfortable lifestyle. Just something he could do and then be sure.

Isn't it interesting, though, that his very question contains a contradiction. He asked, "What must *I* do to *inherit* eternal life?" The answer is that you can't do anything to inherit. If you inherit something it's because of someone else's action – namely that they listed you as an heir in their last will and testament and then died. Hey, that sounds a lot like the Gospel; but this young man isn't ready for that yet. No, before anyone can receive the Gospel they must first come under the conviction of the Law.

And so Jesus, in love for this misguided young man, gives it to him. “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

This was *not* the sort of answer the young man was hoping to hear. Nor is it a formula for actually attaining eternal life. The man asked what he had to *do*, so Jesus gave him something that he knew the man would be unwilling to do. And that in turn would reveal the great big holes in his imagined righteousness before God. He had to face the fact that his worldly wealth and cushy lifestyle meant more to him than the kingdom of God. He had to admit that wealth was the idol in which he trusted. He’d also have to admit that he really didn’t love his neighbor as himself – that he was selfish, greedy, and cared not for the poor. And seeing those faults in himself, no doubt he began to see others as well.

We are told that he went away full of sorrow. And that is a good thing. It means the Holy Spirit was using God’s Law to convict his heart and show him that eternal life was not something he could achieve by his own effort or will. We can only hope that that in turn led him to seek salvation the way the Lord actually delivers it. It’s not a matter of doing. It is a matter of believing – believing in the person and work of Jesus whom God sent into this world to keep the Law that we couldn’t, and then to offer his sinless life as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world. The man called Jesus “Good Teacher”, and so he is. But hopefully the man came also to call Jesus “Savior”.

That may well be the case. There is a long-standing tradition is that the rich young man is none other than evangelist Mark himself. He is known to have been born into a wealthy family, and he is the only one of the four authors of the Gospels who records this particular episode. The others didn’t think to include it; but Mark did, suggesting that it made more of an impact on him. But whether the rich young man was Mark or not, what we know of Mark’s later history serves as a good illustration for the point being made in today’s Epistle lesson.

You see, as important as it is to come to under the conviction of the Law, to see your sin and to repent of it, and to place all hope and confidence in Jesus the Savior, it’s equally important that you hold that hope and confidence firm to the end. The call of Jesus to discipleship, “Come, follow me” is not a onetime event that you can do and be done with. No, it’s a daily call. Jesus calls you to hear his voice today – and every today that follows – as long as it is “today”, “today” being the day of God’s grace.

For his example the writer of Hebrews uses the Children of Israel with Moses in the desert. The Lord had brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand, with plagues of destruction upon their oppressors, culminating with the spectacular opening of the Red Sea, their safe passage through it, and the drowning of the Pharaoh’s pursuing army. The whole company of Israel sang hymns of praise to their gracious Lord and Savior who performed such mighty wonders and who promised to give them the land of Canaan as their inheritance.

But what happened just a few months later when they stood on the edge of that land, the Lord inviting them to go in and take it? They choked. They didn’t trust the Lord. They looked at their own pathetic strength and feared that it was vastly overshadowed by the enemy. The Lord told them not to worry about it. I’m giving you the land. I’ll fight your battles. But they refused to believe. So the Lord said, fine, you don’t believe me? Okay. Stay out here in the desert then. Stay for forty years until all the responsible adults who lost faith in me, who rebelled against me, until all of you are dead. You will never enter rest in the land I promised to give to Abraham and his descendants. Your children will inherit it; but not you.

What happened to them is recorded as a warning for us. One day they believed and were so confident; but then came the today when they refused to hear and to believe what the Lord was telling them.

The same was true for John Mark. Due to his faithfulness and youthful vigor he was chosen by Paul and Barnabas to accompany them on the first mission journey that included travel to the island of Cyprus and then into Pamphylia and Galatia, in what is south central Turkey today. Less than half way through the journey, Mark lost his confidence. He abandoned his colleagues and turned back. And that was before the party had encountered any serious hardship. Paul will say how in his travels he was beaten, stoned, imprisoned, shipwrecked, and what not; but none of that had happened yet. Mark pulled out when the going was still fairly smooth. It was the minor inconveniences of discipleship that shook his faith, not truly having to suffer for the cause of Christ.

And that is perhaps the greatest danger to us: not that our way is too difficult, but that it's too easy. We come to take the Word of God which is so available to us for granted. We think, "I've heard that before. I know that already. I repented for that sin. I've got this. Today I don't need to hear the Lord's voice." But faith doesn't come from inside you. It comes from hearing the Word of the Lord – the call of Christ, "Come, follow me. Let me be your Good Teacher. Let me show you your sin. Let me strengthen your faith in me as your Savior." When? Today, and every today that follows, so that the work of Jesus begun in us may be brought to completion.

Brought to completion as it was for John Mark. Yes, he lost his original confidence and turned back; but he was later restored through the ministry of Barnabas who called him to repentance and to faith in Jesus. The two of them went on other mission journeys together on which they doubtless faced many genuine hardships. This time Mark's faith held fast. We know that he later accompanied the Apostle Peter in his travels, and that he was with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. He became a great champion of the faith, and of course his work for Christ and his truth endures even today in the Gospel he wrote.

All of which tells us two things: first that as long as it is today, the day of grace, that faith and fellowship with Christ can be restored in those who have lost it. For any one of us, even one who has for a time fallen away, the most important work Christ will accomplish through them may lie in the future. That leads to the second point: our responsibility not just for ourselves and our own discipleship, but also for one another. The writer of Hebrews urges us to exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", so that when we see a fellow believer drifting away into sin or into error or into that sense of self-assured spiritual smugness that says, "Today I don't need to hear the Savior's voice", that we speak that Word of the Lord they so desperately need to hear. In that way the work of Jesus will be brought to completion for all of us before "today" ends and the endless Day begins. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!