

You Can't Lose

In the name of him with whom all things are possible, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel reading picks up where last week's left off; so in order to put the rather startling comments that Jesus makes into proper perspective, it will be good for us to back up a bit. The general situation is this: we're in that last portion of our Lord's ministry in which he is heading towards Jerusalem – there to be condemned and crucified according to God's plan for saving lost mankind. As we heard last week, at one point along the way a rich young man came running up to Jesus. There, kneeling before the Lord, he asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. In answer, Jesus told him to keep the commandments – which is a very good and biblical answer, for the Law of God promises life to anyone who keeps it whole and undefiled. The trouble is that ever since our first parents fell into sin, no one can. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And the soul that sins must die.

So the response Jesus gave was only part of the answer. It was designed to lead the young man to honestly examine himself in light of God's Law – which should have led him to acknowledge at least *a few* sins and failures that he'd committed in the past – which in turn would have led him to the inescapable conclusion that he wasn't going to inherit eternal life—at least, not that way; not by doing *himself* what the Law demands.

As it turns out, this rich young man had an extraordinarily high view of himself and a correspondingly inflated view of his record of godly living. Those gross overestimates coupled with an inversely proportionate low view of the absolute standard of perfection that God actually requires led him to respond to Jesus, "All the commandments I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Now I'm sure that most of us would be shocked to hear anyone claim that he'd never sinned even once in his life. It's hard to imagine such chutzpah; but still, to his credit, he recognized that there was something missing. Even while he imagined that his soul was as pure and white as the driven snow, he still had a nagging doubt that he'd done enough to qualify for eternal life.

Thus it fell to Jesus to shatter his unwarranted self-confidence and show him that he was indeed a sinner like everyone else who, *by the Law's impossibly steep path anyway*, was disqualified from gaining eternal life. Jesus told him, "There is one thing you lack. Do this: sell your possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow me; and you will have treasures in heaven." And it's important for us to understand that this answer is not a formula for gaining eternal life and that anyone who does it will live forever. Instead Jesus knew what easily identifiable sins would convict this man. Jesus knew that he was completely tied to his posh lifestyle. He knew that his trust for the future was in the substantial riches he had inherited that pretty well guaranteed him of life of comfort and ease. Jesus knew that he wasn't about to let it all go and follow him as comparatively penniless disciple – which refusal should have led him to realize that he didn't trust God to take care of him, and that he had, in fact, made a false god of his wealth, and also that he didn't truly love his neighbor as himself.

We can only hope that's exactly what this young man was thinking as he wandered away from Jesus in deep distress; because the realization of one's sinfulness is the first important step in understanding the need for a God who gives eternal life not to the deserving, because there aren't any; but as a free gift through faith in the Savior who earned eternal life for lost sinners by his perfect life and atoning death.

Anyway, it's as this bubble-burst young man is exiting the scene that Jesus makes his observation about how very difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. As we heard, this announcement came as a complete shock to the disciples. Why? It was because pretty much everyone believed that with the exception of tax collectors and others who acquired their riches in illegal or otherwise dishonorable ways, the wealthy were *the most likely* people to be in the kingdom of God. Their riches were seen as proof that the Lord was pleased with them. After all, God rewards the righteous, right? So the more you have the more righteous you must be. It's obvious, isn't it? Besides, the rich had more spare time to do godly things like sit around discussing the Scriptures with the Rabbis and scholars. They could afford to make regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem. And they were the big givers to the synagogues. It only made sense that the wealthy were shoe-ins for God's kingdom. Everyone believed it; and certainly that's the way the wealthy themselves saw it.

But it's that sort of thinking that makes it so difficult for wealthy people to enter God's kingdom. If riches are proof of God's favor, if they are evidence of one's inherent righteousness – then why would such a person ever need to repent of sin? And if I've got money and I'm using it to support the synagogue and go on sacred pilgrimages – well, that ought to be earning me a pretty good seat in God's kingdom. This is the problem of wealth. The rich are the most likely to be prideful and self-sufficient. They're the least likely to see their need for repentance and for a Savior. In general, it's much easier for the guy who is struggling and having all kinds of problems to see his need for help both in this life and for the next.

That's not to say that rich people *can't* be saved. Jesus makes that clear too. With God all things are possible. And the truth is that every entry into the kingdom of God takes a miracle. None of us wants to humble ourselves before the Lord. And all of us want to think of ourselves as being pretty good most of the time. But Christianity is a faith for losers. It's for those who recognize that they are shot through and through with sin. It's for those who can confess with Paul, "I know that in me, that is, in my sinful flesh, there dwells no good thing." That's extremely difficult for anyone to say. Only the mighty power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God can reveal it to the heart of a person. It just happens that with some people it takes more work than with others. This is why Paul will later write to the Corinthians, "Think about what you were when you were called, brothers, that there aren't many among you who were wise according to the standards of the world, not many influential (read *wealthy*), not many of noble birth." It's harder for those who think of themselves as winners in this world to see themselves as poor pathetic beggars before God – but that is what we all are. And when by God's mighty power this is revealed to someone, only then is he ready to open his hands to receive the rich treasures of forgiveness and grace that God gives through his Son.

But even we who are in the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus are still looking for leg up over the other guy. The disciples heard what Jesus said to the rich young man about leaving all his wealth behind, following him, and thereby earning treasures in heaven. And this gets Peter to thinking (probably along with all the others), "Say, I left behind my folks and my fishing business to be a disciple ... that must mean *I'm* earning treasures in heaven. I'd sure like to hear more about that." So he mentions rather offhandedly to Jesus, "Ahem, look here, Jesus, *we've* forsaken *everything* to follow you." And of course implied in the comment is the question: what do *we* – we who have so selflessly sacrificed all – what do *we* get? And you have to picture all the disciples leaning forward at this point, lustily expecting to hear Jesus describe in vivid detail the unimaginable riches and rewards that await them in the great beyond that they'll have the pleasure of flaunting for all eternity.

The answer Jesus gives is quite remarkable. You'll note that he doesn't describe *at all* the glories of the new creation. The only thing he says about it is that in the age to come you'll have eternal life – and that is all we need to know about it for the time being. He doesn't want them to focus so much on what lies ahead. Instead, he directs his disciples to think about the treasures they're gaining *right now* as they follow him. He says, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and the sake of the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold *now in this time*, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands ...". That sounds pretty good. The question is: what is Jesus talking about?

Well, with respect to the original disciples who actually did leave their homes and extended families in order to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ all over the Roman Empire – and in some cases beyond it – he's talking about the members of the family of God they would gain in the process. So they left behind their parents, their siblings, and their grown children. How many more brothers and sisters in Christ did they gain? How many more people became their children in the faith as they became spiritual fathers through their teaching? They left behind a few and gained many, many more. And it's interesting that spouses are not mentioned as being left or gained. Why not? It's because the wives of the disciples went with them – and they were only entitled to one a piece. It's also interesting that though Jesus speaks of the disciples leaving their fathers and mothers, he doesn't mention gaining any fathers—only mothers. Again, we ask why? It's because his *heavenly* Father is the only father that becomes theirs, and surely he is more than sufficient for anyone.

Now, you may be thinking, "Okay, I get it; but what about the houses and fields Jesus promises them? I don't remember hearing that the disciples got anything like that – and certainly not 'a hundredfold increase'. So what does Jesus mean when he talks about them?" Good question. Regarding houses, Jesus means the many homes that will be opened to them as the faithful take them in and support them in their ministry. Wherever they went, even among perfect strangers, they always had homes to stay in. And the fields? Yes, some of them left behind a bit of land on which they grew some grain; but they left them to work in the vast fields of the Lord, which were ripe and ready for harvest. It's true: the disciples left a little behind to follow Jesus; but they gained far more.

But that was them. What about us? In the Church of Christ we hear a lot about the cost of discipleship. We hear about how much we must give up and leave behind as we follow him on the path that leads to life – and it's true, there is some cost involved; but here Jesus casts it in a different light and enjoins us to think about the blessing we are gaining that he says far surpass anything we're ever asked to give up. And certainly for someone who enters the mission field, what Jesus said to the disciples applies to them in exactly the same way. And speaking on behalf of pastors like myself, we too have left extended family to do the work of ministry where the Lord has called us – and I can see that the Lord has blessed me with a much larger (and infinitely more interesting) family right here. And people, of course, are the true treasures of the Church.

This applies to all of us who are in the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Most of you didn't have to leave your families behind; they're here with you. And yet you've gained many more family members through the Church. And we see it too when someone gets sick or needs a helping hand – the Church family is there to show the love of Christ, to roll up sleeves and pitch in whenever and wherever it's needed.

And this only scratches the surface of the treasures that are already ours as the disciples of Jesus, for here, together, we receive our Lord's sin destroying and life-giving Word. Here we receive the sure Word of his forgiveness purchased not with perishable gold and silver; but with the priceless blood of God's Son. Here, gathered together as one body, we receive the assurance of his Sacraments and the gift of his Holy Spirit. And here we receive the precious gift of faith – so we don't have to worry about the future because we know the love of him who holds the future in his hands – the love of him who can and will do the impossible for us. My friends, what we already have as the followers of Jesus no amount of money can buy.

The overall point is this: the only things we lose as disciples of Jesus are things we can't keep anyway, but the things we gain can't ever be lost. Or, say it another way, as a disciple of Jesus you can't lose – not now in time or forever in eternity. It's my prayer that our gracious God and Father will open our eyes to see and apply this truth to ourselves so that we may all more fervently and faithfully follow his Son through life, through death, and into the life to come. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!