

Mark 10:17-31

October 11, 2009

South Plains

For God, All Things Are Possible

Here's the question for today: How would you answer if a bright, attractive person came up to you this afternoon and asked bluntly, "What can I do to be saved?" They might not use that language. Perhaps they would offer a little context and say, "I've just been diagnosed with cancer; how can I be sure I'll go to heaven?" Or, they might begin, "You people at South Plains seem so happy. Tell me what I need to do to become a Christian." How would you reply?

That's the sort of question asked of Jesus. He's been proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God. He's validated his proclamation with miracles of healing, by feeding 4-5,000 people, and by teaching with an authority that confounds even the official teachers of the law. People have begun to trust Jesus. Maybe he's a prophet, or more than a prophet. Certainly he's a rabbi with a firm grasp of the things of God. That kind of reputation gets around. One day as he was setting out for Jerusalem, he was stopped by a well-dressed, earnest man who ran up to him, knelt on the ground like a supplicant and confronted Jesus with the bottom line many of us wonder about in one way or another. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Not everyone today believes in life after death. Some believe that life from a squalling baby to a doddering or dignified old age, this life is the best we can hope for. Well, the same diversity of views was found among the Jews of Jesus' time. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, but the Pharisees did. They all believed in the kingdom of God; only they expected different things in that kingdom. So when the man asked about inheriting eternal life, he could have worded the question a little differently; but he was asking about the ultimate blessings God had to offer. What must I do to enjoy these blessings.

Jesus does not answer directly at first. He seems a little put off by the man's flattery, calling him "good teacher." I don't think the man was just being nice. He wanted something from Jesus. His flattery was designed to get what he wanted.

"Why call me 'good'?" says Jesus, "No one is good but God alone." Having put the man in his place theologically, Jesus presses his advantage. "You know the commandments. 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" Think about Jesus' words for a minute.

What's different about Jesus' version of the Ten Commandments?... Well, he only lists six and leaves out the four that deal with our relationship with God. Jesus is not going to tell this fellow that going to synagogue every

week will guarantee eternal life just as he does not tell us to go to church and thus go to heaven. The only peculiarity of Jesus' list is that he substitutes "You shall not defraud" for "You shall not covet." I suspect Jesus is deliberately implying that coveting and defrauding are closely connected.

When my black car was new and shiny, it caught the eye of my neighbor. Fred told me on several occasions, "David, that's a classy looking car. I like it's lines and the aluminum wheels and the color." He had a Lexus in his garage, so I appreciated the compliment. He desired my car. But, that desire never turned into coveting my car because he never tried to defraud me out of it. We don't know how the man in the story got rich. Maybe he was lucky, or maybe he knew how to take advantage of others. Rich people know how to take care of themselves. They can make coveting work.

At any rate, he thought well of himself. He tells Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all of these commandments from my youth." Jesus accepts that assertion. The man was a good person, not necessarily perfect, but a person whose life conformed to the law of God. And Jesus loved him for that. There are not a lot of people in the New Testament who are identified as individuals Jesus loved. Here's one: a well-to-do, straight forward man who comes to Jesus to ask, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Mark writes, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Paul Waddell says, "Jesus sees him as he truly is, but in a way that the... man is not yet capable of seeing himself (*Christian Century*, 10.6.09, p. 18)." That's the wonderful thing about God in Christ. Jesus sees us not as we see ourselves – stuttering to say what we really mean; flailing about in life; messing up important relationships; uncertain if the decisions we make are the best. Jesus knows our shortcomings and sins, but he sees more; he sees the person motivated at heart by the right impulses and moving in the right direction even if it's by fits and starts. And, Jesus knows what needs to happen to keep us on task, on God's tract for our lives.

"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." What a way to inherit eternal life. Here is the key to the blessed life.

I do not believe this is an iron rule every Christian must follow; but neither is it a figure of speech, a hyperbole, a spiritual principle of sacrifice. This is the one concrete decision that this person must take in order to get what he really wants.

There are such moments in life when we are like the trapeze artist in the circus who swings high above the crowd at one end of the big top while the partner, the catcher swings on another trapeze. At some point, the two arcs made by the swinging artists will come close to one another at exactly the right time. The first acrobat,

the flyer, must then let go of her bar and float through the air in order to get to the second trapeze. If she never lets go, she will continue to swing safely, but the arc of her trapeze, the arc of her life, will grow shorter and shorter until finally she is suspended, motionless, where she can only drop into the net. She has to let go to complete the performance, her purpose.

Quite unexpectedly, this man who thinks Jesus may give him something to believe, perhaps a new duty to fulfill or another commandment to keep, this man suddenly finds himself at the critical moment in the arc of his life when he must let go of his possessions in order that Jesus might catch him and swing him to a new place.

Instead of letting go, "he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." The good news is that he grieved. He grieved for what he had lost. He wanted eternal life, a more abundant life, life in the kingdom; but the price was more than he was willing to pay. He was losing what he wanted most.

When Bill and Willie Simmons moved from Shelbyville, Tennessee, to Congo or Zaire as it was then, they went as Presbyterian missionaries, leaving behind friends, jobs and a home. Bill is an able administrator whose mission has been to insure that evangelists and educators and medical personnel have everything they need to do their job, whatever it takes to spread the gospel. He is very good. When I met him, he told me

that he and Willie decided to sell their home in Tennessee because he feared he wouldn't stick it out in Africa if he had a home in the United States. He gave up the one thing that threatened his response to God's claim on his life.

Stewardship season begins next Sunday. This is a story about money, appropriately enough. But, it's not just about money. It's about following Jesus. And, it asks the question, What if the one thing that keeps you from following Jesus Christ?"

What change in your life would free you to become a disciple of Christ?

What has to be let go, or what needs to be grasped firmly to really be a Christian?

Each of us must answer for ourselves. There is a caution, however, in the rest of Mark's story. We would like to spiritualize the business of selling what we own; but Jesus won't let us. "How hard it will be," he says, "for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." I never thought of myself as wealthy person until I went to a financial advisor to get some idea how in the world we were going to send four kids to college. I felt a little uncomfortable sitting in his nice office. He clearly catered to an upper middle class clientele. I even confessed a little apologetically that we didn't have a lot of money to invest, but we needed to make the most with what we had. He asked about our income as a minister and a nurse, our debts and so forth. The, he looked at us

and said, “You know, you’re in the upper 5-10% of income in this country.”

You and I are wealthy. Compared to most of the people in the United States, we’re middle and upper middle class. It doesn’t feel that way because the TV and magazines and internet glamorize more affluent lifestyles. Most of us don’t think of ourselves as the ‘beautiful people’ in the ads. But relatively speaking, we have many possessions like the man in the story.

The hopeful part is that he went away grieving. He went away unsatisfied, still hungry for righteousness. He is the only person in Mark’s gospel who is called to follow Jesus and refuses. At the conclusion of this incident, Mark leaves the door open for the man to change his mind because he went away grieving.

The door is open for anyone brave enough to ask honestly and prayerfully, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question is not just about money, but it is a stewardship question: What is the thing I must let go in my life, or what must I grasp firmly to enjoy real life?

How do you answer that question?