

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Last week, we heard Jesus teach the people — especially the Pharisees, who like to test Jesus. Jesus taught them about marriage and divorce: “*What ... God has joined together, let not man separate*” (Mk 10:9). He taught His disciples of the seriousness of divorce and its consequences. He taught them the way of childlike humility — this is how one receives “*the kingdom of God*” (Mk 10:15).

Jesus then continued His itinerant ministry; He started on His way to another village or town that He might preach there. But as He went a man came up to Him to inquire of Him.

Now this man was not like the Pharisees. He was not filled with guile. He was not seeking to test Jesus or catch Him with some careless words. He seemed quite sincere and pious. With excitement, he ran up to Jesus. In reverence, he knelt before Him. With respect, he addressed Jesus: “*Good teacher.*” With sincerity, he asked Jesus, “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Without doubt, he desired eternal life.

The man had come to the right place, but he came with the wrong question. “*What shall I DO?*” He may have thought, like many still do today, that God may have begun a good work in Him, but He had to finish it with the good things he did. But as St. Paul says, the same One who “*began a good work in*” each of us, is also the One who “*bring[s] it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Phil. 1:6). Or as the writer to the Hebrews says, Jesus is both “*the founder and perfecter of our faith*” (Heb. 12:2).

The man piously came up to Jesus to ask what he needed to do when the source of man's salvation stood right there before him. It would take a bit of work to shatter the layers of misunderstanding that shielded the man from His youth.

Jesus made some riddling statements. He began asking, “*Why do you call me good? No one is good except for One, and that's God.*” Here Jesus is not denying His own divinity, but is pointing the man to the fallacy of his meriting eternal life. After all, God demands a perfect keeping of the law. The Lord told Israel: “*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*” (Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:48). Yet, we are not, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom. 3:23). This man was not good; before God, ordinary men are not good. “*None is righteous, no, not one; ... no one does good*” (Rom. 3:10, 12).

On the other hand, you and I know that the man Christ Jesus was good, and not just as a teacher, for Jesus is God. And yet, as we heard last week, Jesus came down from His Father's side to “*share in [our] flesh and blood, ... [being] made like his brothers in every respect,*” save only that He had no sin, neither did He commit any sin. And this so that the man Christ Jesus could do for us what we

sinners could not do — be holy as God requires and live a holy life. Yet He did it not for Himself but for us and for our salvation. But even more than that, in His perfection, Jesus went to the cross, the perfect sacrifice for our sin, making *“propitiation for the sins of the people,”* that *“through [His] death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery”* (Heb. 2:17, 14-15) — slavery to sin and the law.

Which makes Jesus' next statement all the more riddling, for Jesus pointed the man to the law as the way to eternal life. It's riddling, for we know that *“by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight”* (Rom. 3:20). Yet, Jesus points the man to the commandments: *“Don't murder; Don't commit adultery; Don't steal; Don't bear false witness; Don't defraud; Honor your father and mother.”*

You surely recognize all those commandments as “Second Table” commandments that have to do with our neighbors. And looking at them in a superficial way as the man did, we in our personal piety might join him in saying, *“all these I have kept from my youth.”* But we'd be lying to ourselves, for knowing the fullness of their meaning, knowing that keeping them perfectly means always doing them and never failing to do what needs to be done, and doing them with a joyful and willing heart — all this leads us to understand: we fail.

That's why when Luther teaches us to confess our sins, he points us to the commandments: “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?” (Small Catechism, Confession, Which Are These?)

Your “What Doctor Luther Says” insert may also seem riddling to you. In this Disputation concerning Justification, Luther begins by conceding that here in Mark 10 there is an implied promise that eternal life can be gained by keeping the Ten Commandments. “I [Luther] approve the minor premise on the basis of Mark 10 [:17-19], where justification is promised to one who keeps the decalogue. There even the inheritance of eternal life is promised. He who keeps the decalogue, then, obtains forgiveness of sins.” Again, here is Luther: “I concede the whole argument that he who keeps the law is righteous.” But Luther conceded that argument only that he might deliver a mighty blow to self-righteousness. “[Y]ou must ask where the man is who keeps it,” Luther continued; “whether man after the Fall keeps [the law]. I say that he does not” (*Luther's Works*, 34:187).

No, man does not keep these Second Table commandments of loving neighbor; and he surely doesn't keep the First Table commandments of loving God above all. Thus, Jesus gazed upon the man and, loving him, sought to lead him away from an endless and unreachable salvation by His own striving to a salvation by the only "*name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12).

To do this, Jesus would move from the Second Table to the First and show the man where His treasure truly was, and so, where His heart was (Matt. 6:21). Jesus 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.*" Jesus thus exposes the man's idolatry, for his heart was with his great possessions and not with Jesus, God's own Son, for money and possessions are "the most common idol on earth," Luther says in his Large Catechism on the First Commandment (Large Catechism, Part 1: 7)

The First Commandment, you know, forbids idolatry — having another god. Luther writes about it, "Now, I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god." Luther repeats it: "to 'have a god' is to have something in which the heart entirely trusts" (Large Catechism, Part 1: 3, 10).

This man in our Gospel is a tragic character. He was sincere and reverent and respectful and wanted eternal life. Yet He was looking in the wrong place — to himself and his own righteousness for his salvation. He would not admit that he was an idolater with a heart set on worldly possessions and wealth; he would not, he could not, follow Jesus' gracious invitation to "*follow me,*" and so, he "*went away sorrowful.*"

Still today, people want to know about the inheritance to eternal life, but they have a wrong idea about it. Like this man, they think of an inheritance as something to be earned. Not so. An inheritance is pure gift, from the heart of the giver. St. Peter says that eternal life is such an inheritance from God, "*kept in heaven for [us]*" (1 Pet. 1:4). Moreover, we receive it when we share in Christ, having been incorporated into Him by baptism, having been "*born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (v. 3). We receive it when out of His great mercy, He brings us to faith, saving us "*by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,*" justifying us by His grace. This is what makes us "*heirs – that is, inheritors — according to the hope of eternal life*" (Titus 3:5-7).

How shall we receive the kingdom of God? — humbly, as an inheritance, as we look to Jesus in faith and not to our own works. Lord, give us this faith.

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