

Mark 10:17-27

Martin Luther was born Nov. 10, 1483. He grew up a normal Roman Catholic boy. His father wanted him to be a lawyer. He received his B.A. and M.A. in liberal arts and entered a school of law. Then unexpectedly he entered a monastery. Something frightened Him. He felt the anger of God against his sins. What he considered to be a most holy life gave him no peace; neither did he find peace when he became a priest. Even after he became a doctor of theology in the Catholic Church he wrestled with the question, "I am a sinner; what must I do to be saved?" The teachings of the church gave him no consolation. His calling caused him to study the Bible and it was there in the Scriptures that Luther found the Gospel truth that one is not saved by his works but by faith alone in Christ. He said he had found, as he called it, "The gate of paradise."

Our sermon text shows us that Luther was correct in his finding for today Jesus teaches that eternal life is not earned; it is a gift of God.

As Jesus went on His way to Jerusalem a young man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him. "Good teacher," he said, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" From a human perspective, one would say this was a fine young man. He was successful, he was wealthy, and he was decent and polite. People looked up to him. The man was spiritually minded. He was concerned about his standing before God and he was sincere. He ran up to Jesus and he fell on His knees. The man had a burning question and now he had a chance to ask a famous teacher. Perhaps Jesus could help him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The young man addressed Jesus as good teacher. His words reveal a flaw in his understanding. He did not think of Jesus as the Son of God and his Savior but as a great teacher who could prescribe some additional work he could do to merit eternal life.

The young man's question reveals that, though he was a good person, he still felt something was missing. All that he accomplished did not give him peace of mind. There is also something inconsistent in what he says. He speaks of eternal life as an inheritance. One does not earn an inheritance. An inheritance is a gift.

Jesus' answer must have caught the young man by surprise. "Why do you call Me good?" He answered. "No one is good except God alone." The Lord's point was, "If you think of me only as a human teacher, then you can't call me good because all people born of an earthly father and mother are sinful. Only God is good.

But Jesus went on, "You know the commandments." Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony do not defraud, and honor your father and mother.

Oh, yes, the young man knew the commandments. He said, "Teacher all these I have kept since I was a boy." He was a self-righteous Pharisee. He did everything he could to win God's favor and he felt he had done a good job of it. Yet, there was something missing. Had he done enough? The man was much like the Apostle Paul before his conversion. Paul could boast of himself, I was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the Law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness faultless. But Paul said, "I count all this as rubbish."

In spite of the young man's errors, we read that Jesus looked at him and loved him. The young man was a representative of the world of unbelievers, so very wrong, so

deluded but Jesus loved him and because He loved him the Lord set about to burst his bubble. People must hear the truth even though it stings.

The Lord told the young man, "One thing you lack. Go sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven. Then come and follow Me.

At this the man's face fell. He went away because he had great wealth. Before this the young man was so full of enthusiasm. He felt he was almost there in attaining perfection. He was at the point of meriting eternal life and then Jesus showed him the truth about himself and the fellow was crushed. He couldn't do it. He was wealthy and he loved his wealth more than he loved the Lord. He didn't keep the very first of the commandments. Would that he had cried out at that point, "God help me a sinner." But he didn't; instead, he went away.

Then Jesus looked around. This was a teaching moment for His disciples. He said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." Most people want to be rich. Though having riches is not sinful, there is a temptation that comes with riches. The Bible says, "If riches increase, set not your heart upon them. "

We read that the disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Let me ask you children, you know what a camel is; and a needle? Is it possible for a camel to go through the little hole in a needle? Of course not. So it is impossible for a rich man to completely take his eyes and his heart off from his riches and to regard God as his only treasure.

Now the disciples were really troubled. They were aware of their own shortcomings. None of them were perfect and they knew that no matter how hard they tried they could not reach perfection. In fear and frustration they said to one another, "Who then can be saved?"

The Law of God makes demands that a person cannot fulfill no matter how hard he tries. It isn't that God's Law is bad; it is because people are sinful. In no way can one merit eternal life. There are only two religions in the world; that of the young man and that of the Lord Jesus. The most popular religion, that of the rich young man, teaches that men can by himself or with help merit God's favor and eternal life. The followers of this religion are often very sincere. They are plagued by the same thought that troubled the young man. "Have I done enough?" You will see them in extreme cases hurting themselves, even blowing themselves up to earn eternal life but it is never enough. Who then can be saved?

Now the good news. Jesus takes the winning of eternal life out of the sinner's hands and takes it upon Himself. Listen to these comforting words, "Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

God did what people could not do. That is why Jesus, Who was more than a human teacher, came to earth. He came to do what was impossible for sinful mortals. He, God, became man who was without sin. He came into the world to represent all mankind before the bar of God's justice. He kept the commandments perfectly in the place of sinners and He came to wash away people's sins by shedding His blood on the cross. He came to earn that heavenly inheritance and to give it to helpless sinners as a free gift.

The point our Lord is making is that you and I cannot save ourselves nor can we contribute in any way to our getting to heaven. But Christ, true God, did it all for us. You have heard the expression, "Let go and let God." That applies especially here. Stop trying to save yourself and joyously accept the truth that finally brought peace to Martin Luther. That truth is summarized in this Bible passage from the Letter to the Ephesians, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast. "