

THE LACK OF POSSESSIONS

Mark 10:17-22

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B, Proper 23)

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The gospel lesson for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 17 through 22. In this gospel lesson, Jesus tells a rich man what he doesn't have. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 17, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.' " ²⁰ And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." ²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and 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." ²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's play a game. The name of the game is "Which Commandment?" We've played this game before, so you might remember the rules. But we'll review them anyway. All you have to do is identify which commandment, or commandments, are at work in this text. If you want to see the list of commandments while we play, you can find them on page 95 of the hymnal. The commandments are in italics, while Martin Luther's explanation is beneath them in regular print. And Luther's explanations will prove to be very insightful. So look at the commandments, and think about the text we just read. Which commandment, or commandments, are at work? This is a really good game to play with this text, because Jesus basically plays it with this rich young man.

We'll come back to our game in a minute, but first let's talk about this man. He's rich. We learn that at the end of the passage. We also know that he's young. Mark doesn't say anything about his age, but the parallel passage in Matthew tells us that he's young (Matt. 19:20, 22). This is a rich young man. He's also a rule follower. That's what he says about himself, anyway (10:20). So he sounds like the kind of guy you would want your daughter to marry.

He ran up and knelt before Jesus. Not too many people did this. Kneeling was a sign of great respect, perhaps even worship. Other people who did this were worshipping Jesus. They asked him for help, often calling him "Lord" (Matt. 8:2; 9:18; 15:25). These are both acts of worship. So we wonder what this man thought of Jesus.

He says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17). It's interesting; he takes a posture of worship, but he doesn't address Jesus as Lord. He calls him, "Good Teacher." This, of course, is true. Jesus is a good teacher. But is this all the rich young man thought of Jesus? Or did he recognize him as something more? Jesus wants the man to deal with this issue.

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So the first thing Jesus says is, “**Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.**” (10:18). For the rich young man, the impact of this encounter is going to depend on who he believes Jesus to be. Does he think Jesus is just a good teacher? Or does he recognize him as God? But Jesus doesn’t let him answer the question. It’s rhetorical. Jesus is saying, in a thinly veiled way, “I am God.”

Then he goes on to answer the man’s question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This isn’t the only time Jesus is asked this question. It’s interesting, he’s asked the exact same question in Luke 10(:25). It ends up leading to Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s a law question: “What must *I do* to inherit eternal life.” Of course, we cannot be saved through the law. “Since the fall into sin, no man can perfectly keep the Law” (H.U. Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism*). And Jesus knows this. In many places he teaches that we are saved through faith in him. But since he is asked a Law question, he answers with the Law ... sort of. Both here and in Luke 10, he answers in such a way that if you don’t think about it too much, it seems that Jesus is teaching an extremely difficult standard of the Law. But if we take Jesus’ words to heart, we will find him to be our compassionate Savior.

But since the man asks a Law question, Jesus first explores the way of the Law. He basically plays “Which Commandment?” with his entire life. “**Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother**” (10:19). These are commandments four through ten, but in a slightly different order. He does five through ten in order. “**Do not murder,**” is the Fifth Commandment. “**Do not commit adultery,**” is the Sixth. “**Do not steal,**” is the Seventh. “**Do not bear false witness,**” is the Eighth. And for the Ninth and Tenth, Jesus says, “**Do not defraud,**” instead of, “Do not covet.” Usually we think of coveting as envy. And that’s part of it, but it also includes fraud, that is, obtaining something in a way that only seems right. Luther picks up on this in the Small Catechism when he teaches the Ninth Commandment by saying, “We should fear and love God so that we do not seek by craftiness to gain possession of our neighbor’s inheritance or home, nor obtain them under pretense of a legal right.” And then he explains the Tenth by saying, “We should fear and love God so that we do not estrange or entice away our neighbor’s wife, servants, or cattle.” Or, as Jesus states it, “**Do not defraud.**”

Then Jesus backs up to the Fourth Commandment, “**Honor your father and mother.**” I don’t know why he does it this way. Maybe the rich young man wasn’t really honoring his parents, maybe Jesus is leading him in a direction back toward the beginning of the commandments, or maybe it’s just random. But Jesus completely covers commandments four through ten. This is what we call the second table of the Law. It’s the commandments that instruct us how to treat our neighbors. They can be summarized in one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31, etc.). And the man says, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth” (10:20).

Then Jesus proves himself to be an even better teacher than the young man thinks. Of course, the man is deceived. Perhaps he has kept these commandments better than most people. Let’s assume he has. Let’s assume he really is the guy we want our daughters to marry. But he has not kept the commandments perfectly, and that is God’s standard. So Jesus could nail him on this. He could say, “No you haven’t. Two days ago you lied and told your mom you had other plans so you couldn’t come over for dinner. And remember when that girl down the street got a new slim-cut tunic? I know where your mind went. And I know you didn’t report all of your overtime to the tax man.” Jesus is God. Whatever sins this man has committed, he knows it, and he could

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nail him on it. But he does something else. He lets him have commandments four through ten, because those are not really the man's problem.

So back to our game. If you guessed any or all of commandments four through ten, you are right, and you get a bronze medal. But we're going for the gold. There's another commandment, and this is the man's real problem. It's the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me."

Jesus hits him in his heart, and he does it because he loves him (10:21). He wants him to inherit eternal life. So he says, "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" (10:21). Where is it written in the law that in order to have eternal life, you have to give away every last possession? Nowhere. And if that were the ticket to eternal life, it would actually be hateful to give away everything you own, because then you would be robbing eternal life from the people you give it to. So that's not what's going on here. It's not one more work to get this rich young man over the hump. Jesus was attacking his god. His faith was in the wrong place. His god was his wealth, and this false god was robbing him of eternal life. Despite his great possessions, he was in poverty. Jesus shows this when he says, "You lack one thing." And that thing he lacked was a Savior. He did not have the one true God, because his possessions were his God. His possessions did not make him wealthy. They made him poor.

So it's really about the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me." Luther is brilliant and simple in the Small Catechism when he explains this by saying, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." That's what it means to have a god. It is diagnosed with these three words: fear, love, and trust.

First: fear. This is the one that might sound a little weird, at least to our modern ears. In ancient times, it wasn't so strange to fear God, but modern thinkers have declawed him. Or it's more like we pretend God doesn't have claws. C.S. Lewis did his best in *The Chronicles of Narnia* to restore the roar when he portrayed Jesus a lion who is not safe, but he is good. He is both dreadful and compassionate. Fear is a form of worship. And we worship false gods when we fear the power they have over us. Fear of a virus. Fear of the government. Fear of the Democrats. Fear of the Republicans. Fear of poverty. Fear of death. Fear of scuba divers under your bed. It doesn't matter what it is. We worship the things we fear when we ascribe power to them.

Second: love. And by this I don't simply mean those things or people that we really, really like. But I mean those things or people that we serve. Love is action. Whatever you sacrifice yourself for or devote yourself to, that is what you love. So consider how you spend your time and energy. What are you really willing to work for? That is what you love. We worship the things we love when we serve them and sacrifice ourselves for them.

Third: trust. Where do you find your security? What makes you feel safe? It may be something you don't even have yet, but you pursue it, because you think that once you get it, then you will be secure. We worship the things we trust when we find our security in them.

All of this is what it means to have a god. Whatever we fear, love, and trust in above all things, that is our god.

For the rich young man, his possessions were his god. And we all know how easily possessions or money can become our god. It's probably the greatest idol of our time. It can easily consume our fear, love, and trust.

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We fear the power of money. Even the poor can make an idol out of money when they fear not having enough. But fear is not exclusive to the poor. The rich or middle class can do the same thing. You get accustomed to a certain lifestyle, and you fear losing it.

We love money. This is seen in the way we work for it and sacrifice ourselves in order to obtain it. And I'm not talking about just having a job. Everyone needs to work. But our work can easily slip into a love for money when we push and sacrifice to get a little more. We end up serving money.

And we trust money. We pursue it and hoard it, because we find security in it. We see the power of it, and we crave that protection.

So we fear, love, and trust in money. It becomes our god. This is the part of the sermon where the TV preachers would offer to release us from this idol of money. And you know what their prescription is.

Most of the time, money isn't really the idol. Sometimes it is. But money is such a common idol, because it serves as a proxy for just about anything. That is, it might not be the money itself that we idolize, but what we do with our money. This doesn't get us off the hook for our love of money, but we should go a little bit deeper and see what it is that we really fear, love, and trust in.

You can tell a lot about a person by looking at their bank account. The FBI has known this for a long time. And we can look at our own bank accounts to diagnose our idolatry. Where does your money go? If you spend a lot on your mortgage or at home improvement stores, your house may be your god. If you spend a lot on vacations, adventure may be your god. Or it could be cars, motorcycles, education, music, liquor, video games, sports, or just about anything. Here's another one that's kind of subtle. If there isn't anything that really stands out, you just have a large bank account without a lot of withdrawals, or maybe you invest a lot, that could mean that the future is your god. You can learn a lot about yourself by looking at your bank account. Elsewhere, Jesus said, **"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"** (Matt. 6:21; Luke 12:34).

So what's the problem with these false gods? The obvious answer is that God has commanded us to have no other gods before him. But God is not selfish. It's not a matter of him needing our fear, love, and trust. Every commandment is for our good. Every commandment protects the gifts he has given to us. The problem with every false god is that they are unable to save us. They are really not capable of filling the role of God in our lives.

So when Jesus tells the rich young man to sell everything he has and give it to the poor, it's not one great work to get him over the hump and put his good works in the positive column. Jesus is attacking his god, because his god is not able to save him. His possessions are making him poor. That's why Jesus tells him to sell everything and give to the poor.

Then he says, **"And come, follow me."** To follow Jesus means to learn from him. Too often we think of that command moralistically. That is, following Jesus means that we obey his commandments. And, of course, that's part of what it means to follow Jesus, but only part of. It really means to listen to Jesus and learn from him. I say that because, for this rich young man, when Jesus says, **"Follow me,"** he literally means that they guy should walk with him to the physical places Jesus goes. And if he had done that, what would he have heard? What would he have seen?

I've mentioned a few times recently that in this part of Mark's gospel, Jesus is on a journey. He is on a journey to Jerusalem and the cross his Father was preparing for him there. And at this

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point, Jesus is getting pretty close. Chapter 11 starts with the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. That's the start of Holy Week.

Had the rich young man taken Jesus up on this invitation, he would have heard Jesus teach about how he is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. He would have heard Jesus teach about his suffering and death and resurrection. And then he would have seen his God and Savior bleed and die for his redemption. And he would have seen Jesus risen from the dead. The command, "Follow me," was not a work the rich young man had to perform in order to inherit eternal life. It was an invitation to come and see what Jesus was about to do to earn and give eternal life to him. Jesus attacks his false god and offers himself instead.

The one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, commands us to have no other gods. Why? Is it because he's selfish? No. He is the very opposite. He commands us to have no other gods because he loves us. Nothing else can save. Nothing else can give eternal life. But Jesus Christ, the one true God in human flesh, gave himself for us. We fear, love, and trust in Jesus, because he has given himself for us, and he gives us eternal life as a free gift. This is what it means to have Jesus as our God. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.