

Pentecost 21 – October 13, 2024

Text: Mark 10:17-22

Theme: The Faithless Question

The readings today encourage us to forsake the things and ideals of the world and focus instead on God and His kingdom. It is easy to compartmentalize our faith in this life. We keep God, Church, and morality in one drawer and work, school, and reality in a different drawer. That's why, when we bring spiritual issues to the forefront, we hear the criticism sometimes that we don't live in the "real" world. The insinuation is that the things of God do not really apply in day-to-day life. Politics, money, contract disputes: these are worldly things. Faith, hope, and love: these are Godly things and never the two shall meet. But God says that faith, hope, and love supersede politics, money, and contracts. The things of God are over all other things, not separate from them, but over them.

The man in the Gospel came running to Jesus to find out what he had to do to acquire eternal life. You can hear his mistake in the question he asks. What must I do? He assumes that eternal life is like anything else in the world that he acquired in life. Because we live in the world, where everything worth having requires hard work to acquire, we easily begin to think of salvation the same way. You can hear it when people complain about some evil befalling them. They say things like "I'm a good person! I go to church every week! I give thousands of dollars to the church! Why would God do this to me?" People often act like they

acquire salvation by doing prescribed works which earn them God's favor. But from a business perspective, that is ludicrous. Just think it through. Could any amount of time or money purchase eternal life? Could it offset even a small portion of your sins? Of course not. And not only that, but you would be working to pay off something for which the full price has already been paid! Even from a worldly point of view that's just dumb.

Jesus doesn't just tell the man his mistake because people who are firmly attached to their worldly ways never hear spiritual advice. So, Jesus aims at the heart of the problem. He tells the man that if you want to do something that will help your faith to better grasp eternal life, stop depending on your worldly wealth. God will provide whatever you need, so give away all your wealth and depend on God. Jesus has the unique ability to look into a person's heart and see their idol. For this man, the idol was wealth. So, Jesus told him to get rid of his idol and eternal life would be his. He says this because idolatry is the chief faith-killing sin. Get rid of your idols and your faith will grow disproportionately.

That is why the first commandment is the first commandment. "You shall have no other gods before you." Idolatry destroys faith. It destroys faith faster than any other sin, and a person can make an idol of anything, even things that might seem good. How can earning a bunch of money be bad as long as you earn it in a wholesome way and use it well?

It is not bad, in and of itself, but if it becomes an idol for you, it works to kill your faith.

So how do we know what idols are in our lives? That's the tricky part. The only way you can know if something is an idol is when it interferes with your faith growth. If it gets in the way of feeding your faith, or encourages you to act in ways that are contrary to your faith, and you just can't let it go, it's an idol. That's why the rich man went away disheartened. Jesus forced him to choose between his idol and eternal life. He chose his idol. It seems strange to us. Who would walk away from eternal life over money? But if you are asking that question, money is not that important to you. But Satan is insidious. If money is not your idol, he will strive to find something else that stands in the way of your faith. He will force you to choose over and over again and each time you choose that other thing, your faith grows a little weaker. What is it in your life that Satan uses to try and distance you from God? That's your idol. Get rid of it.

It's not easy because idolatry is like a drug. You can come to believe that you need it to thrive or even survive. Why would an alcoholic keep drinking even when his life and his body is collapsing around him? Because the drug has convinced his body that he needs it to survive. He feels sick when he doesn't receive his drug. When we look at that from the outside, we think, "how ridiculous, just stop drinking." But it's not that simple for the one addicted. We look at the rich man in the

Gospel and think “how ridiculous,” just give away your money.

Obviously, Jesus is going to take care of you. If Jesus told me to give away everything, I’d have a U-Haul on its way to Goodwill in no time flat! But for one whose idol is money, it’s not that simple.

Things of this world are not equal to things of God. Things of this world are subordinate to things of God. If we want to avoid idolatry, we strive to keep everything and everyone in this world subordinate to things of God. We feed our faith first, before we do anything else. We consume the Word of God, the body and blood of Christ and remember our baptisms every day before we do whatever we do in the world. By keeping your faith strong, you will avoid faithless questions. You will never get to the point of asking the faithless question in the Gospel for today. You will know that you don’t have to do anything to inherit eternal life. It is God’s gift to you. That’s why it is called grace. He also gave you faith to hold on to that gift of grace, and He gives us Word and Sacrament to give our faith the strength it needs to hold on to grace.

Eternal life is already yours today. Never let Satan trick you into asking that faithless question. Remember that the things of God are always more important than everything else. Keep your faith strong lest you lose your grasp of the greatest gift you have ever received and sink into the vast sea of idolatry from which Jesus rescued us when He died on the cross and suffered Hell for our sins.