

# NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 10/11, 2009

“What Must I Do?”

Mark 10:17b

“What must I do?” That was the question that unnamed man asked Jesus that day on the way to Jerusalem. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It wasn’t that he probably didn’t have an opinion already, he probably did. It’s probably that he wanted Jesus to affirm his opinion as if there was something he really could do. It’s always nice when someone agrees with us.

“Keep the commandments,” Jesus said. “But I have – all my life I’ve kept them,” the man replied. Now certainly Jesus knew better. He knew that this man, like all men, was, by nature, incapable of keeping the commandments because man is, by nature, sinful and unclean. Oh, there might be a certain measure of outward conformance to the commandments. After all, some people do act better than others. But Jesus knows the heart. He knows, as he made most clear in his sermon on the mount, that all men, if not in deed at least in thought, break the commandments all the time. But he also knows that it isn’t whether one appears to be good or not that really matters, especially before God. It’s what one is like on the inside that counts. And apart from God’s grace all men are sinful on the inside. And the wages of sin is death -- not eternal life. And so, in an effort to get this man to understand, Jesus tells him one more thing.

“Go and sell everything you have and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven,” he says. “Then, come, follow me.” The man got the point. The Bible says that, literally, his face fell and he went away sad because he had great wealth. In so doing, it became all too apparent that this man hadn’t really kept even the first commandment let alone the rest, for he had made riches his god. But worse than that, it became all too apparent that this man was unwilling to change.

And yet, you see, it really wasn’t the money that was the problem. It was, as the Bible says elsewhere, “the love” of money. Just think about it for a minute. Here was God, whose commandments this man professed to have kept since he was a boy, standing before him, in the flesh, calling for him to put him first and the man refused. And with that Jesus went on to say, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.”

Ah, the rich! Not many, if any, of us here today would probably call ourselves rich. To us, the rich is always someone else. Most of us probably see ourselves as middle-class and lower middle class at that. Most of us find ourselves struggling to make ends meet especially these days. And yet, if we’re honest with ourselves and if we look beyond our own little world to the world around us, we might just think otherwise. Perhaps by

American standards we're middle-class but by the world's standards we are rich. We're rich because most of us have what we need. And on top of that most of us have a lot of what we want. It's not so with many in the world today.

I'm reminded of a story I heard about an average middle-class man who had been reading about the problems of world hunger. And after hearing the words of today's Gospel lesson in church one Sunday, he began to wonder how Jesus' words to the rich man might apply to him. And so he went to the pastor for help. The pastor told him this story to try and help him understand. It seems that the old city walls of Jerusalem had a small opening called "the eye of the needle." And when a traveler arrived at the city after dark and found the gates to the city closed for the night, he could still enter the city through this small opening. But to do so he would have to completely unload his camel and himself and then crawl on his hands and knees with his camel through that opening. So, said the pastor, must the rich leave their wealth behind if they're to enter the Kingdom of God. "But I'm not rich," said the man. "Oh, but you are," answered the pastor. "You have all that you need and more." Feeling somewhat guilty the man replied, "So what should I do? My time and abilities and resources are barely adequate for my life style." "You may not like what I'm going to say," said the pastor, "but if you're serious about knowing what you can do, it's this – change your life style."

"If you're serious about what you can do, change your life style." In effect, that's what Jesus told the man in today's Gospel lesson. And that's what he's telling us today as well. It has to do with faith, for in the end we know that there is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life. Jesus has done it all for us. But faith in him to save us invites us to look within ourselves and looking at our relationship with God and with others, we're moved to give up on ourselves and give everything over to him.

Without a doubt, God has blessed each and everyone here today with great material and spiritual blessings. Faith gives it all back. It's like what one man said when asked if he was in danger of giving everything away, "not at all. I shovel out and God shovels in, and He uses a bigger shovel than I do. And, on top of that, he said, God started shoveling first."

"What must I do?" And the answer is this --believe ... believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior to the point where everything else is now gifts to be given away. May God forgive us the littleness of our faith and may He, for Christ's sake, increase in us true faith unto eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.