

Sermon: 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 10:17-23 – The rich young man

Theme: Jesus and His view of life

Goal: Self-righteousness and selfishness versus Love to God and Love to all (Altruism).

Dear Friends,

Introduction: We have several problems or misunderstandings in this text: 1st) the question addressed by the young man to Jesus is a wrong one: What must **I** do to inherit eternal life? - 2nd) the man was self-confident that he had done whatever was required by the Law; he considered himself a self-righteous person. - 3rd) His love for his money and properties had the first place in his heart.

But we have some very nice teachings in this text as well: 1st) Jesus loved the rich young man, as He loves everyone! 2nd) Jesus' concern about the poor touches us deeply. 3rd) To follow Jesus is the way to inherit eternal life.

Let's see it one by one :

I – A self-centered view of life

The rich young man was concerned about his own eternal future. He was a faithful member of the church, doing whatever was ordained by the Commandments. Apparently he was a very successful and wealthy man. Nobody could accuse him of any sin. But, like Nicodemus (John 3), he felt that something was lacking in his life and therefore he came to Jesus. Mere obedience to the Law doesn't bring comfort or security.

Jesus immediately realized what was lacking in the life of this man. The man had a self-centered life and everything had to run according to **his** point of view. Therefore his question, “What must **I** do...” He didn't ask what **Jesus** could do for him. **He** wanted to solve his life issues himself.

When Jesus mentioned the Commandments, He quoted all related to our neighbor, this is, the second Table of the Law. What was missing? The First Table of the Law: The love for God above all things. Without this, the love for the neighbor is just superficial, and not complete. God was not the first One in the heart of the rich young man; but his wealth occupied the first place. He was not ready to leave his wealth to follow Jesus and to love his neighbor. He thought that he had kept all the Commandments since he was a boy; but he didn't; because the summary of the Law is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27).

Jesus mentioned the poor as representatives of all who need our help and our love. The poor are those who suffer the most, who need love and need help. When we read the books of the prophets in the Old Testament, they condemn not only the idolatry of the people, but the result of the idolatry as well: the poor were oppressed and exploited (as we heard in the reading from Amos 5), the hungry were not fed, the widows and orphans were despised. When we don't love God, we don't love our neighbor. If we have a self-centered and selfish attitude in life, we will not look for the needy, but only to ourselves and to our ambitions and pleasures.

Jesus' answer was a shock not only to this man but to the disciples as well. It was actually an intentional shock to wake up the self-centered man to the reality around him. But he didn't wake up. *His tragic decision to turn away reflected a greater love for his possessions than for eternal life* (CSSB 1522) and for his neighbors and for Jesus.

It happened to him what Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sower: “Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” (Mark 4:18,19).

Jesus said also in another text: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: a man's life does not consist in the

abundance of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15).

Do we need a similar shock? What is our view of life and of the world? Where is our hearth? What is in the center of our heart? How do we receive God's word, His warnings and His guidance?

II – An altruistic view of life

Jesus points at a different view of life. *The rich man was thinking in terms of earning righteousness to merit eternal life, but Jesus taught that eternal life is a gift to be received... Jesus was not denying the goodness of the man, but was forcing him to recognize that his only hope was in total reliance on God, who alone can give eternal life, (CSSB 1522) and not on his wealth.*

We have to look outside us, first to God, and then to the others, to the needy, to the poor. We can talk about an *altruistic view of life*. I found a nice definition of altruism: *Altruism is the principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others..* (Internet). It is just the opposite of selfishness or self-centeredness.

In spite of the man's selfishness, Jesus loved him. We always see Jesus' love. Jesus wants the best for everyone, for rich and for poor, even if this costs suffering or a big sacrifice. It is like when a father or a mother reprimands the child hard: it is not because they hate the child, but because they love the child and want its best. The child doesn't understand when he/she is not allowed to do something just because he/she is too young to do it. But the parents know what the best for the child is.

In His love, Jesus was radical with the young man. “One thing you lack, He said. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor; and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Jesus knew how strong the man was bound to his wealth. This is idolatry, to love money more than God and the neighbor. He was not aware that nothing he had would take him to heaven. Only true love to God and true love to the neighbor could give him the eternal life that he was looking for. Like Matthew, who left everything and followed Jesus (Matthew 9:9-13); like Zacchaeus, who promised to give half of his

possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8), Jesus challenged this young man as well. But he was not ready to give everything to the poor and to follow Jesus.

We cannot say that this is a rule for all Christians. But we need to be aware of this teaching. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”, said Jesus (Matthew 6:21). We have to examine our view of life, if we are selfish or if we are altruist, if we care for ourselves only or if we care for others as well. Jesus said that we always have poor around us to be helped (Matthew 26:11). And the first Christian church gave a special recommendation to the new congregations among the Gentiles not to forget the poor (Galatians 2:10).

Martin Luther had a big concern about the care of the poor. If his wife Catherine hadn't saved some money, Luther would have given all his salary to the poor people who knocked at his door. Even in the 95 Theses he condemns the purchasing of indulgences as a waste of money; this money should be given to the poor. (Newsletter Oct-Dec 2012). He put the Gospel in the first place, and the money to serve the needy and to serve God. Let me read two of the 95 Thesis:

“Christians should be taught that one who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does a better action than if he purchases indulgences.” (43)

“Christians should be taught that he who sees a needy person, but passes him by although he gives money for indulgences, gains no pardon from the indulgences, but only incurs the wrath of God.” (45)

Conclusion: To follow Jesus has its cost. But it's worthy: It results in eternal life! We receive eternal life not just because we give to the poor, obey the Commandments, or whatever more we do. We receive it by grace, through faith, because God loves us and saves us for the sake of Jesus. But in this new life He gives us, we serve Him and we serve our neighbor with gladness, with altruism. God has the first place in our heart. Everything follows the first Commandment, the Commandment of faith: “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:1-3). Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 14 October 2012

