

What Condition My Condition is in...

Shepherd's Grace Church

October 14, 2012

Mark 10: 17-31

As He was getting ready to go on a journey, a rich man came running up to him and knelt before him. The man said to him, " Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone!" Then he said, "You know the commandments; do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not defraud anyone, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother." The man said, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Then Jesus looked at him and loved him. He then said, "There is one thing that you lack. Go, sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor so that you will have treasure stored up in heaven, then come and follow me." When the man heard these words, he was shocked and went away greatly grieved for the man had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and he spoke to his disciples saying, "How hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." The disciples did not understand his words so he said again, "Children, how difficult it is for a person to enter the kingdom of heaven." At this, the disciples began discussing among themselves saying, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answered, "With humans, it is not possible, but not for God. With God, all things are possible!"

Then Peter began speaking to him saying, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you." Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left fields, children, father and mother, sisters and brothers and houses who will not in this age receive a hundred fold—fields, children, mothers, brothers and sisters and houses with persecution—and in the age to come, eternal life." However, many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (NRSV with preacher's emphasis added) (Also read Job 23: 1-10)

Let me first set the context of this message. This is Cowboy Church Sunday at Shepherd's Grace. We are outside among nature, with all the noises of the streets behind us. We have all the smells, the sounds, the sights of God's creation surrounding us. The children are sitting on bales of straw in front, many of the elderly are sitting comfortably in the rear. We are anticipating a covered dish dinner after service and we have been and will be entertained by the Donnie Huffman band sharing great Christian Gospel music from his many recordings and recordings of some of the most popular Gospel artists. I have asked Donnie to sing a particular song about Henry, an outlaw turned Sheriff, turned outlaw again that Donnie has written for a town festival at Medicine Lodge. The story of the ballad is true and it sets the stage for this message.

The message today from Job would have rung true with many from the old west. Times were hard for Cowboys. Many never knew where their next meal would come from or if they would be subject to natural disasters such as rain, storms or high winds. These hearty people might have, at times, wanted to discuss their plight with God. They would have wanted to make their case, and while, like Job, they

would not have wanted to be subject to the full wrath of God, they would have hoped he would listen! They would have hoped he would explain to them his plan for the seeming futility of their situation. Henry, the man mentioned in Donnie's song, would have been one of those people wanting to debate with God. He had turned his life around, left a law breaking lifestyle to pursue a law abiding, law keeping lifestyle. He met a woman and wanted to court her but still there was something missing for him. Henry, as the story goes, felt he couldn't provide for his intended in the ways she deserved. He worked hard at his new career but could not see the kind of future there he wanted for himself or his prospective bride. He wanted more!

This, feeling that something was missing, this desire for more is exactly where Job's lesson intersects with the message from the Gospel today. As it intersects, it reminds me of several historical trivia facts you might find interesting.

As incredible as it sounds, men and women in the "old west" took baths only twice a year (May and October) Women kept their hair covered, while men shaved their heads (because of lice and bugs) and wore wigs. Wealthy men could afford good wigs made from wool. They couldn't wash the wigs, so to clean them they would carve out a loaf of bread, put the wig in the shell, and bake it for 30 minutes. The heat would make the wig big and fluffy, hence the term 'big wig... ' Today we often use the term 'here comes the Big Wig' because someone appears to be or is powerful and wealthy.

I am thankful that it is October, and bathing time again! I hope all of you make the most of it, but the greater point in this story is that we look at powerful people differently. We do not always know their background or their desires, but we assume their motives. These "bigwigs" are often assumed to be powerful, and to be pursuing more power, but sometimes they are seeking something more. Was this the case of the rich man who approached Jesus? Let's hold on to that question for just awhile.

Personal hygiene in the "old west" left much room for improvement.. As a result, many women and men had developed acne scars by adulthood. The women would spread bee's wax over their facial skin to smooth out their complexions. When they were speaking to each other, if a woman began to stare at another woman's face she was told, 'mind your own bee's wax.' Should the woman smile, the wax would crack, hence the term 'crack a smile'. In addition, when they sat too close to the fire, the wax would melt Therefore, the expression 'losing face.

People of the old west were not always what they appeared to be. If you think about it, people today haven't changed very much. We often put on faces or make gestures that are perceived one way when, in fact, we feel very differently. We are pretenders and as humans, we come from a long line of pretenders. People generally want to be perceived in the best light possible. When the rich man approached Jesus, he pretended to know something when he called him "Good." Jesus perceives his pretense, his hypocrisy, and while he is willing to engage the person, he is not willing to engage him under false pretense! For this reason, Jesus says to the man, "Why do you call me good?" He wants to set the record straight, to talk to the man about what is real and not about what is expected. The man wanted to flatter Jesus, but Jesus wanted to get at the heart of the man's question. When we approach God, do we open our prayers with flowery words or do we just get right to the heart of the matter? Job

wanted to debate the heart of his complaints with God. Can we be as truthful as Job? Can we be as honest with God? Let's hold that question for just awhile as well.

Early politicians required feedback from the public to determine what the people considered important. Since there were no telephones, TV's or radios, the politicians sent their assistants to local taverns, pubs, and bars. They were told to 'go sip some Ale and listen to people's conversations and political concerns. Many assistants were dispatched at different times. 'You go sip here' and 'You go sip there.' The two words 'go sip' were eventually combined when referring to the local opinion and, thus we have the term 'gossip.'

As the election approaches in November, we all feel the bitterness and negativity of the campaigns for both sides. Pollsters survey day and night to determine the weakness of the other side so that candidates can exploit that weakness for their own gain! The "Go-Sips" of prior years were nothing more than pollsters today. They looked for the weakness that could be exploited and they ran back to their camp to report. Why must we always exploit the perceived weaknesses of people. Henry, the focus of Donnie's song, had a perceived weakness. He couldn't provide enough for his perspective betrothed. Alyce never asked for more than Henry could give. She married him as he was, but his own greed, his own desire caused him to change his perception of himself. He believed the world demanded more, owed more and so he succumbed to the temptations of the world. He slipped back into his old ways and pursued ill-gotten gain for the sake of satisfying his own greed! How do we often succumb to the desires of the world? What is Jesus trying to tell us in the passage today? Where can we engage our debate with God? Will he indeed give us a fair hearing about our human condition?

At this point we have many more questions than answers! Armed with these questions, let us closer examine the rich man who approaches Jesus and see what we can learn. This man who approached Jesus was powerful and wealthy. By worldly standards, he was a "Bigwig." He had everything his human heart could desire but he realized there was something missing still. He came and knelt before Jesus and asked, "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" The man recognized that even though he had all the world had to offer, there was still something missing in his life. In Chapter 9 Jesus asks "What does it benefit a person to gain the whole world and loose his life. Indeed, he says, of what good is it to possess the whole world and forfeit one's life."

Like Henry, we can pursue wealth and fame, we can pursue dollars and "success," as defined by the world but they will never satisfy us. All the wealth in the world that does not lead to peace in the knowledge of who we are is useless. Henry thought his wife wanted more worldly possession. He sacrificed his life in a dishonorable way to try to gain them for her. Alyce, after learning of Henry's disgraceful actions, retrieved his body and buried it in a place where she could remember him. All she wanted was Henry...the real Henry!

That is all the rich man wanted as well. He wanted himself. He wanted the truth about himself. His question about inheritance reveals his truth. He believed he was entitled. He believed he had eternal life coming as a right. Eternal life is not a right! It is the most precious gift God can give. It comes to us at an incredible price. The price God pays for the redemption of each one of us, for our eternal life, is

nothing less than the life of His Son! Jesus makes this point later in chapter 10 when he says the “Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus sets the man straight regarding his wealth. He says, “first go, sell and give the money to the poor.” Jesus knows that the possessions the man has are keeping him from accepting something else in their place. He knows the condition of this man is his stumbling block. Jesus offers the man an alternative condition; treasure in heaven. He presents the man with a way of overcoming the wealth of the world with the wealth of the “kingdom.” God does not demand of all of us that we sell all we have. What God demands is that He occupy the primary place in our hearts. The rich man had his heart set on his possessions and not on God. He could not have “life in the Kingdom” until he re-organized his priorities.

The world we live in often confuses our priorities. We see people who have more than we do and we think we want what they have. They seem to be living a life of ease without care and strife and so we pursue that. We begin to think “things” are our right and the more we pursue these things the more we begin to believe all “things” are our rights!...even the things of God! When we hear Jesus telling us to put God and others first we are shocked! This is exactly the reaction of the rich man. His human condition was unprepared to hear to requirement of God!

On Saturday night, Rochelle and I had a chance to hear Kenny Rogers in concert in Oklahoma. He did a wonderful show with all his former number one hits; *the Gambler*, *Ruby*, *Coward of the County* and many more, but there was one that caught my attention because I had forgotten it completely. Kenny Rogers has been performing professionally for more than 50 years and many of you may have also forgotten that he got his start as the lead singer in a band called, *Kenny Rogers and the First Edition*. One of the songs that band made famous was, *The Condition my Condition was in*. the second verse of that song is very telling regarding our message for today.

I Stuffed my soul in a deep dark hole, and then I followed it in

I watched myself crawling out, as I was crawling in!

I was so tight I couldn't unwind

I saw so much I broke my mind

I just stopped in to see what condition my condition was in.

The rich man who wanted more in his life, Henry from Medicine Lodge, our outlaw turned sheriff, wanted to know what condition their condition was in. They knew there was something missing but they didn't know how to ask. They thought they were entitled because of their status. The rich man because of his birth right, Henry because he had given up his old ways to take up new. Both went away shocked and grieving because they could not do what God asked of them. They could not put him first in their lives!

The disciples were amazed when they heard Jesus explanation of their situation. He said that it is hard for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom. The disciples didn't understand so he said it again! **HOW HARD**

IT IS TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN!" The reason the disciples did not understand was because it was assumed that because of the rich man's wealth he already had secured God's blessing. Wealth was, wealth still is commonly assumed to be a sign of God's favor. We want to believe that wealth and power are symbols of God's approval. When we see our big wigs, we want to hold them up as the example of God's grace. When we hear the gossip, we want to believe the hype and spin so that we can elect those who have found God's favor! We want these people to be our people! We want these people to be us!...and so we put on our mask. We don't want anyone to see behind the make-up we wear and into the real self that we are because they might then know the truth of our need. We would be exposed! Others would know what condition our condition was in!

The rich man was exposed in today's gospel! He loved the world more than he loved God. That was his condition. Peter and the others express another condition! They have given up everything! But why? Peter claims it is so they can follow Jesus. If Peter is telling the truth to Jesus in his debate, he can rest assured. Jesus promises life and life in abundance (John 10: 10) but there is a caveat. There will be persecutions. Henry never understood those persecutions. He never understood that when he gave up everything to turn his life around there would still be tests and trials. Neither did the rich man! Both assumed a right to reward. If we assume Jesus as a right, we can never place Him first in our heart! It is not until we understand Jesus as a gift that we can truly accept the fullness of God's grace! What condition is your condition in?

If we love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind (Deut. 6.4) we understand the world will hate us and will persecute us, but we will know that we have treasure stored up in heaven! It is hard to enter the kingdom of heaven. The world will keep trying to pull us back in! Some of us will get it right more quickly than others. Some of us will have to try over and over and over again. We will want the glamour and glitz of the world! We will want the girl! We will want the goods and the gold! But the promise of Jesus is there for all who will persevere! Many who are first now will be last and the last will be first but those who endure, those who are willing to let Jesus into their heart will receive the treasures of heaven!

As Jesus stops by this week to be in conversation with you, will you be truthful with him? Will you get to the heart of the matter? Will you put away your pretense and hypocrisy? Will you lay your concerns all on the line as Peter did? Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior wants to extend God's grace and love to you! He wants you and I to know that he will accept us as we are and that he will demand from us nothing less than our whole heart! We can have the comforts of this world...with persecutions! But we must be willing to give who we are to God without pretense or pretend! How will you respond to him as he says, "I just stopped in to see what condition **YOUR** condition was in!"

Amen.