

# Come, Follow Me!

Psalm 19:7-14, Matthew 19:16-30

August 27, 2000

“Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good.” What an odd thing to say! We think of Jesus as being good, but when confronted so directly with this, he points beyond himself to God his Father, from whom alone comes all good and every perfect gift. Any good we know is from him, any good we see is derivative, and any good we are or have is by his grace alone. More to the point in today’s reading, the doing that results in eternal life is not our doing at all but is the doing of a miracle by God alone. This is the first and the major correction which Jesus made to the questions of the rich young man standing before him. “One there is who is good.”

The rest of the conversation proceeds as if it were being done by mirrors. This young man wanted to find out how well he was doing, trying to live the righteous life, trying to earn his way into eternal life and into heaven. So as a part of this physical, as a part of this check up, Jesus said, “Let’s take a look and see how you are doing.” One instrument that he had at his disposal was the first table of the Ten Commandments—the first four commandments, all of which have to do with duty to God. Jesus did not even need to pull this mirror out of his bag. The young man was a very religious man. Maybe he did not need to check this one just now, although he had already corrected him a little bit with the initial saying that “One there is who is good.”

There was a second instrument at his disposal. That would be the second table of the Ten Commandments, the last six commandments, numbers five through ten. All of these have to do with duty to neighbor. “Stand in front of this mirror,” Jesus said. “Take a look at these commandments, and let’s have a check up and see how you are doing.” “Which commandments are you talking about?” the young man asked, perhaps already getting a little nervous. Jesus said, “You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Now, this last one is not really a part of the Ten Commandments. Jesus kind of sneaked that one in on him, I believe. But it’s a good summary of the second table of the Ten Commandments. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And the young man stood there amazingly enough and said, “Looking good! Looking pretty good—I’ve done all of those!”

“Now wait just a minute,” Jesus said. “There’s one more thing we need to check here.” And he reached into his bag of medical instruments and pulled out a small, round, curved, magnifying mirror. “Take a close look with this one, right at the end of your nose. We may have slipped by the Tenth Commandment just a little too quickly. It says ‘You shall not covet.’ Let’s magnify and amplify what that says a little bit. ‘If you would be perfect,’ if you would be complete, and whole, and mature, and have the integrity of human being which God desires for you, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!’” The Good Doctor said, in effect, “You may have obeyed all of the law, but you are one greedy person, and that greed is a cancer right there on your face. It requires radical surgery. To get rid of it, you have to cut it out.” But the young man went away, preferring to die with all his toys than to live without them.

Today’s Bible reading tells us again that the greatest, the deepest, the most important, the most profound human need that we have is to be in right relationship with God. There are many

other important things about human life, good and useful in and of themselves, but none of them is as important as this one. And we get into trouble when those things take priority over this one. Part of what we are told again and again is that our deepest needs are not physical, not food or clothing or shelter, as important as they are. Our deepest needs are not emotional, not friends and family, as important as they are. Our deepest needs are not psychological, or social or political, or economic, or financial, or national, or military, or anything else. Our deepest need is to be in right relationship with God. We were made for that. That is what human life is all about. And without that, nothing else counts for anything. So how do we meet this need?

Two ways are set forth here. One is do it ourselves. Be perfectly obedient to the will of God as expressed in the Ten Commandments, and you will never fall out of that good relationship. That is entirely true, as far as it goes. The problem with this option is that it is not an option for us. It is not an option for you and me. It is impossible for us. That is what all of these mirrors are about. There is no way that we can stand in front of the Ten Commandments and take an honest look at ourselves and walk away thinking we are clean. It just will not happen. We have fallen out of obedience to the will of God. And once that has happened, even if we could be obedient from this moment on, which we cannot, we could never do enough good to make up for the disobedience we have already fallen into. That way will not work.

There is another way for us to be in right relationship to God, and that is to receive it as a gift from Jesus Christ. What we cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is a miracle. It is beyond human possibility. But it is within the scope of divine possibility. God has provided for us to be restored to this right relationship with him that meets our deepest need. God gives this to us in Jesus Christ.

Now, we have to know, we have to realize that these two ways—first of all earning it on our own and by ourselves, and secondly receiving it as a sheer gift from Jesus Christ—these two ways are in direct opposition to each other. They are entirely contradictory; they cannot touch each other; they cannot be merged; they cannot come together at all. There is no way to mix the two. We can not say “I am basically a good person; I deserve to go to Heaven” and also receive the forgiveness of our sin at the same time. It is one way or the other.

One of the purposes of the law, one of the purposes of the Ten Commandments, is to function as the mirror before which we stand, in which we see our grievous failures and by which we are driven to the foot of the cross, driven to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. That is difficult. But it is a good and useful purpose of the Ten Commandments. We ignore it to our own detriment and loss.

Now I want to do a little bit of updating of the language which we are using. Our passage talks about things like eternal life, kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God, righteousness, and justification. These are biblical and religious words that we do not use very much outside of church. But there are other similar words that we use all of the time. We may not be asking “How might I earn eternal life?” but most of us do ask “What is the meaning of it all?” “What is the purpose of human life?” “Why am I here?” “What is the value of life?” “How can I be secure?” “How can I provide security for my family and for my loved ones?” These are the ways that we ask important questions about human life today. And these are remarkably similar to the concerns we have heard in the scripture.

And there are still two approaches. Life has meaning not simply because of what I give to it, not simply because of what I make of it or what I can grab hold of. The meaning of life does not have to do with the amount of money, power, or influence that I have or exercise. Instead, life

has meaning only because its origins are in God. Life means something because we exist in the mind of God. Meaning is not made clear in our grasping of life. Meaning is made clear in our pouring it out even as Christ did on the cross.

Or again, life has purpose not simply because I have determination and will and grit, which I may on some days but not on others. Life has purpose because God has a plan, and a will, and a mind, and a goal, and a purpose. God is in control. The whole thing is going somewhere and that gives it purpose.

As for value, human life is inadequate in and of itself to be the basis of value for itself. If you look only to humanity, life is cheap. We see that in societies where people are treated only as one more cog in the wheel, one more consumer in the economy, one more soldier in the field with a life to give for some greater good. Life is cheap except where we understand it is valuable because God values it. Life is valuable because God loves us and cherishes us and cares for us. Life is precious only because we are precious to God.

As for security, life is fundamentally insecure. We cannot finally secure ourselves against disease, decay, disaster, decline, and death. They will overcome us every one. Our only security is in God who holds us safe and secure in the hollow of his hand.

These are the ways we talk. I do not know anyone who has an overwhelming compulsion to obey the law of the Old Testament. But I do know that a lot of us are worrying about meaning, purpose, value, and security in life. It is the same problem. How do we relate to God? We cannot accomplish it on our own. Instead, we must depend upon the goodness of God.

Then we can still consult the Ten Commandments as an expression of the will of God as a guide for our lives. Yes, the Christian life is a life of obedience. Having admitted our faults, having received God's grace, we can then try to live obediently out of gratitude.

Let's return to the young man in the story for just a moment. He had two problems. One was that he was blinded by his own good deeds, the other was that he was very tightly attached to his money. The first problem was that he could not see that he needed forgiveness and so he could not receive it. The second problem was that he could not let go of his money. We begin to see that instead of his having the money, it had him. And thus we hear the language about the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven. Riches are not bad in and of themselves, but spiritually they are powerful and therefore dangerous.

It is important for us individually not to be trapped by money, and one way to exercise our freedom over it is to give it away. It is important for us as the church not to be trapped by money. The church is not in the business of getting rich. We receive many offerings, and we give much of that away also. And I hope that by the end of this year we will have given away more money for the mission of the church here and nationally and internationally than we have ever done before.

Nowhere in the Old Testament law does it say, "Sell all you have." Jesus intensified the commandment, "You shall not covet," in order to bring that commandment into full focus for this particular young wealthy man. And he did it very well. Jesus wanted him to give not just from his wealth, but to give away his wealth, and with it all of his security, status, and position in the community. This may not be a general rule to apply to us all. It was applied to this one person. We may have other faults when we look in that mirror of the Ten Commandments that are just as serious or even more serious. But we do have to ask whether or not this in fact does apply to us in particular, also. We live in the most affluent age of human history. We live in the wealthiest nation of the world. We are under the constant influence of the advertising industry

which encourages and stimulates our covetousness and desires. As Martin Luther says, “Whatever our heart clings to, that is our God.” Do we cling to our money too tightly? We are a population at great risk.

After Jesus invites the young man to sell his possessions and give to the poor, he also invites him, “Come, follow me.” Jesus invites him to have a new center, a new focus, a new orientation for his life. Jesus, the giver of God’s grace, invites this young man to find in him new meaning, purpose, value, and security. This is the offered perfection—this wholeness, completeness, maturity, and integrity—the eternal life which the young man actually sought. He turned away, sad, and that is remembered not for us to look down on him, but as a warning to us not to do the same thing.

By the way, the disciples in the second half of the reading not only acknowledged the great difficulty of what Jesus asked the young man to do but they also notched it up one level. Peter said, “Hey, think about it—we’ve given away everything, and we’ve followed you, we must be pretty good fellows! What are we going to receive for having given so much away?” And Jesus commended their obedience, but he also warned that they were at grave risk of another sin at the next level of spiritual pride, of “Look at me and how good I am.” We still have to rely on God’s forgiveness at every step of the way. And Jesus warned of a great reversal at the end. “Many that are first will be last, and the last first.”

What does this living word of God and this ancient encounter have to say to us today? First, we are to stand before the mirror of the will of God and take a long, hard, honest look. What are our imperfections? Greed? Falsehood? Something else? All of the above?

Second, we are to cast ourselves upon the mercy of God and to depend not upon our own strength but upon Jesus Christ alone.

Third, not as a way of earning righteousness, but as an act of gratitude for God’s grace, as a way of living out the righteousness given to us, we are to be faithful stewards of the wealth that has been entrusted to us, giving worthily to the support and mission of the church, being generous disciples, giving to help the poor. Can we actually do this? For God all things are possible. “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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