

Gospel: Matthew 19:16-26

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

The Gospel lesson today deals with one of the most touchy of subjects: the relationship of a man to his possessions. Yet this relationship is so key, so vital to our spiritual life that one sixth of all of Christ's words, and one third of all of His parables, deal with this very topic.

This of course raising some interesting questions. The first of which is "Why does the Lord place so much emphasis on money and material possessions if He is teaching us about, and leading us to, the Kingdom of God?" Shouldn't we be learning more about spiritual things such as prayer, forgiveness, peace, and love? Why the emphasis on money?

Well, brothers and sisters, the answer is really quite simple. The Lord is not after our money, He does not need our possessions, after all He is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe. All the Lord wants is our happiness and for this He needs our hearts.

Throughout the Scriptures, and even in secular thought, we see the heart as the seat of man's emotions, the place where man's deepest feelings reside, the place where man truly loves, and the place where man holds his dearest possessions. It is the one place that no one else can touch. Isn't it commonly held that no one can take away what we hold dear in our hearts?

And how true this is – no one has jurisdiction over our own hearts but us.

In today's Gospel reading we encounter a man who approached Christ and said, "What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" And to this the Lord responded, "Keep the commandments."

To this the man said, "I have kept the commandments from my youth, what still do I lack?"

Now let us pause for a moment and ask ourselves why this man is asking this question in the first place? From the man's own testimony we can see that he was a man of God for he kept the ways of the Lord, he put into practice the commandments of the Law, even from his youth. It must be that even though he was living a righteous life, he still realized that he was lacking something. He didn't yet know exactly what, but he knew that something was missing.

In a sense, he is at the crossroads between the Old and New Testaments. He is at the point where he has fulfilled to the best of his abilities all that was prescribed in the Mosaic Law, and for this, as we see in St. Mark's Gospel account, the Lord loves him.

But the man sensed in his innermost being, in his spiritual heart, that there must be more. He knew that the Mosaic Law was leading him in the direction of eternal life, but he knew that he had yet to take hold of it, he wasn't yet a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

And so the Lord answers the man, with the only answer possible, the only answer which would lead him to the eternal life he desired. He says, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me."

In saying this the Lord takes the man from the Old Testament to the New, He takes him from the Mosaic Law to the Evangelical Law, the Law of the Gospel. He offers the man heavenly treasures in exchange for earthly riches. He offers to free the man from a life subject to corruption and death and to grant him what he desired – eternal life.

Yet, the Gospel tells us that, "when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

The young man was sorrowful because he even though he wanted eternal life, when he heard what he must do to attain it, he was unwilling. He was unwilling because he was not ready to give up the earth to receive heaven. He, like the master's servant in last week's Gospel, wanted the best of both worlds. That man wanted divine forgiveness but didn't want to extend it to his neighbor, and this man wanted treasure in heaven without giving up his earthly possessions.

In a sense, the young man was sorrowful because he was like a spiritual athlete who had been training his whole life for the victory of godliness but then when the moment came to seize the victory he faltered.

In St. Luke's Gospel we find out that this young man not only kept the Mosaic Law from his youth, but he also was a ruler of a Synagogue and therefore knew the Scriptures and how God was preparing the Hebrew people for eternal life in their long-awaited Messiah.

He knew the story of Cain and Abel, and how Abel's sacrifice was accepted because he offered the best of his harvest, his first fruits, while Cain's was not because he offered only what was left of his flock. He knew how Abraham not only offered to God through His servant the priest Melchizedek ten percent of his spoils after defeating his enemies, but also his own son Isaac, before he was stopped by an angel. The young man knew how God commanded the Israelite people to offer ten percent of their possessions for the Temple, the priests, and the poor, so that they would both be free from the love of money and would also sanctify the rest of their material possessions.

This young man, as a ruler of a Synagogue, knew all of these things, and he kept the commandments in expectation of the Messiah. And then when he heard the Lord's teaching which not only built upon but even surpassed the precepts of the Mosaic Law, he started to understand that this Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah who came to bring eternal life to His people.

We see an inkling of the man's faith when at the beginning of the Gospel he approaches Christ and calls Him "good teacher". And what does Christ say to this? "Why do you call me good, no one is good except God?" In saying this, the Lord was telling the man, I know that you are wondering who I am – if you are not sure, then why do you call Me good? Your faith should proceed your confession.

But then Christ goes on to prove to the man that He is in fact God by revealing to him both the way to eternal life, and the obstacle which was blocking his path – his love of possessions.

And so the man departs in sorrow, knowing that even though he had heard from the Lord Himself the way to eternal life, he was not willing to follow it.

If we think about it, how many times do we know the Lord's way but are unwilling to follow it? Unwilling because of fear – fear that we cannot walk on the water like the Apostle Peter, fear that we cannot practice the ways of God during the stormy temptations of this world. Unwilling because we don't want to forgive our neighbor a few little offenses even though God forgives us our great and countless offenses. Unwilling because we like the man in today's Gospel have filled the treasure chests of our hearts so full with worldly possessions that there is no longer any room for God and His love.

Brothers and sisters, the disciples were right when they said to the Lord that His sayings were hard, for the way to life is straight and narrow, and there are few who go in this way. Yet, we know two things.

First, we know that there is no other way to eternal life – to the Kingdom of heaven. Worldly living, trusting in ourselves and our own ways, living a life without the Cross of Christ, a life free of sacrifice, a life devoid of the courage and resolution to base our thoughts, words, and actions upon faith in Christ will not bring us to His Kingdom.

Second, we know that with God all things are possible. With God we are able to live the life He commands us to live. We are able to walk on water, forgive our neighbor and bear no grudges. And we are able, little by little, to cleanse our hearts from the love of and trust in worldly possessions, so that we can offer to God not only the biblical ten percent of our time, talent, and treasure, but all that we have, whether it be material, physical, or spiritual.

For we know that only when we have given up the ways of the world can we follow the ways of God. Christ Himself tells us that with Him this is possible. So let us not depart from the Lord in sorrow as did the man in today's Gospel, but instead let us give our hearts to Christ so that He can fill them with His faith, joy, and love. No one has jurisdiction over our hearts but us– let us be sure to fill them with heavenly treasures instead of worldly riches – with joy instead of sorrow.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.