

## **“What Must I Do?”**

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 14, 2018  
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Holy Scriptures: Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup> Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” <sup>20</sup> He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money<sup>[a]</sup> to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup> Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup> And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is<sup>[b]</sup> to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup> They were greatly astounded and said to one another,<sup>[c]</sup> “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

### Footnotes:

- a. Mark 10:21 Gk lacks *the money*
- b. Mark 10:24 Other ancient authorities add *for those who trust in riches*
- c. Mark 10:26 Other ancient authorities read *to him*
- d. Mark 10:29 Or *gospel*

### What Must I Do?

<sup>17</sup> As [Jesus] went out into the street, a man came running up, greeted him with great reverence, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?”

<sup>18-19</sup> Jesus said, “Why are you calling me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, don’t cheat, honor your father and mother.”

<sup>20</sup> He said, “Teacher, I have—from my youth—kept them all!”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, “There’s one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me.”

<sup>22</sup> The man’s face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.

--Mark 10: 17-22 (The Message)

Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him!  
Jesus heard his heartfelt question about his desire for life after life,  
for immortality in the arms of Father Abraham,  
for a comforting word of assurance that God loves him both here and  
now  
and forever and ever, amen.

*“Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?”*

He interrupted Christ to ask, **“What must I do?”**

Are you like me, having learned that Jesus interrupts on a regular basis  
and has yet to make an appointment.

So, it’s got to balance out if a creation of God interrupts the Child of God.

*“Good teacher, what must I do...”*

Jesus responded kindly to this interruption.

Christ received him, offered to him His personal, undivided attention,  
affirmed his spiritual foundation and formation  
—you know the Commandments, the Law of Moses!—  
and then Jesus offered to him a personal, uncompromising message.

*“There’s one thing left:  
Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor.  
All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth.  
And come follow me.”*

## **What Must I Do?**

We witness in the Gospels that during Jesus Christ’s one-on-one encounters

He directly responded to each particular person's particular, personal situation.  
Be careful before declaring His Word to one particular soul  
to be a Universal Truth for All Souls.

Now, they may be so.

They may be Universal Truths,

holy teachings to be applied by one and all,

Divine wisdom meant to be employed *todo el mundo*, all the world.

Still, be careful.

Tread gently when overhearing the Gospel.

The Bible provides collections of testimonials of faith experiences of God.

We call them sacred, holy, amazing.

They reverberate, speak, sing to the core of our being.

Jesus' personal, one-on-one encounter with you

may offer altogether different messages

than this offering to the man...

because your story is not his and his is not yours.

Be open to the possibility that God

may have an entirely unique holy Word for you to apply

while on the Way, on the road, on the journey.

Having shared that possibility,

clearly, we are certainly invited to glean insight

from Jesus' response to the man's question,

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

One Universal Truth for All Souls

is that being a follower of God, a disciple of Christ,

requires dedicating everything you are and have,

with joy and sincerity.

If your possessions possess your life, release them.

If others have too little because you have too much, rectify the situation.

If anything that separates or divides or distracts has a claim on you, let it go.

It's never too early or too late to re-prioritize.

Dedicating our whole self to God

is part and parcel of our relationship with the holy.

We are restless until we do so.

We see a restless world around us, hungering for hope and truth and love,

and we feel that restlessness ourselves.

We have this hunger deep inside that can only be fed through relationships:

with God, with one another, with our true self.

*"We are made for relationship with God.*

...We harbor a bedrock desire  
for a transcendent wellspring of meaning and purpose in life.  
...Therefore until that relationship is sought and found,  
there will always be an existential emptiness at the core of our being.  
Centuries ago Saint Augustine confessed to God [*Confessions*, Page 3],  
"You have made us for yourself,  
and our heart is restless until it rests in you."  
—Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, P. 5.

Live the question: what is Christ saying to you and me about our particular situations?

### **What Must I Do?**

My friends, we don't know how this story ends.  
We do know how it starts.

This Bible story is a drama told in three acts.  
We overhear the First Act.  
The beginning took place offstage,  
pictured through the man's comment  
about his life's spiritual formation and foundation.  
Jesus spoke of the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments.  
Surely, they provided for him a groundwork for grace,  
*He said, "Teacher, I have—from my youth—kept them all!"*

The Ten Commandments are set in the context of God's redemptive purpose,  
The Commandments' point us to God's liberating love and saving grace.  
In and of themselves these commandments do not save.  
They are not weapons or stone tablets  
to be used over and against someone or groups of people.  
Their purpose is to show us the life that God expects of us.  
They show us our ethical borders and boundaries.  
They show us how to walk the walk and talk the talk.

*The New Yorker* magazine ran a cartoon  
that depicted Moses reciting the Ten Commandments to an audience of  
Israelites.  
Moses said, "*Thou shalt not create graven images, Ira.*  
*Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain. Still looking at you, Ira.*  
*Thou shalt keep holy the Sabbath. You getting this, Ira?"*  
[Published in *The New Yorker* 4/18/2011, by Paul Noth]

The Word of the Lord is personal — *you getting this, Ira?* -- and it is communal.  
The love of God is given to you, and to you, and to you, *todo el mundo*, all the world.

In Martin Luther's book, Small Catechism,  
Luther points out that the first commandment,  
*"You shall have no other gods."* is really the only commandment.  
All the rest, says Luther, are illustrations of what it means  
to *"fear, love, and trust God above all things."*  
We are to mobilize our entire lives around one true loyalty.  
If God is our God, then we will naturally obey all other commandments.  
If God is our God, then we will revere the Lord's name.  
If God is our God, we will be delighted and eager  
to hear and learn the Word of the Lord,  
to honor our parents and elders,  
avoid harming our neighbor,  
love and honor our spouse and companion,  
help our neighbors improve their income and property,  
and help our neighbors keep what is rightfully theirs.

Jesus Christ interpreted the Law of Moses in the best of lights.  
Christ called to the Disciples then and today to take positive action,  
to revere and honor God,  
and to assist our neighbors in the conduct of their lives.

The curtain falls for the first intermission.

The audience ponders their own spiritual formation: **What Must I Do?**

The Second Act begins with the man stopping Jesus on the Way.  
Jesus looks upon him and loves him.  
Jesus saw the man before Him as capable of receiving and embodying divine life.  
The old mystics called this *Capax Dei*.  
The Apostle Paul called this *"being filled with the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3)

A Christ-filled life of following God and embodying divine love  
is *"initiated and then sustained by the One  
who lives both within us and beyond us."*  
*"Spiritual growth is essentially a work of divine grace with which we are to cooperate.  
Free and active cooperation is our share of the labor.  
...experience teaches us that we don't cooperate with God's intentions for us easily.  
Opening ourselves to the work of the Spirit requires work and discipline."*  
—Marjorie Thompson, Soul Feast, Pages 8-9.

Jesus looks upon him.  
He loves him.  
He challenges him to the core of his being.

*“There’s one thing left,” says the Christ.  
“Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor.  
All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth.”*

We think no one is listening to our quiet, mumbled query: **What Must I Do?**

In the silence we hear the unsought-for, uninvited, unasked-for response:

*Seek to be in communion with whomever God places before you.*

*Have compassion for the poor and the have-nots.*

*Put your faith formation into action.*

The cost of discipleship may be more than imagined.

How far am I to extend my compassion, my heart, my gifts, my resources?

What if I do...but then don’t end up “on Top of the Heap, King of the Hill, A #1?”

If I give everything away, what about me?

Will the Lord provide then?

Or is the question I should be living, what does my neighbor need?

### **What Must I Do?**

Into a fragmented and faithful world,

a broken and beautiful creation,

in love God delivered Life then the Law,

then delivered Christ and His Body, the Church.

Fellow mortals, what more is required, left to do, to offer, to bring to the God’s Table?

Our cooperation.

What must we do?

Cooperate.

That’s all. Play ball.

Participate. Collaborate. Cooperate according to God’s Law and Love.

Engage. Oblige. Relate to God, who seeks a relationship with you.

Behold and be held in the loving arms of God and one another.

This was brought home to me when I was 22 and a first-year student at seminary.

A required first-semester two-credit course was called Voice Building.

Professor Bob Seaver was a marvelous teacher,

filled with enthusiasm and encouragement.

But I resisted.

Dr. Seaver was slightly effeminate and unabashedly authentic.

I was afraid of who he was—or more likely, who I thought he was—

and deathly afraid to admit my fear and prejudice.

One day in class midway through the semester,

I read the prescribed text from a pulpit in the classroom.

My effort was less than stellar.

He asked me to do it again, but the second try was even worse.

*"Play with me!"* exclaimed Professor Seaver.

*"I can't teach you and you won't learn if you won't play with me."*

Something clicked.

I heard that.

I heard him.

I heard a divine Word that my senseless fear  
was conquering any growth or learning.

In that moment I took a risk,  
shoved aside my homophobia,  
and made a commitment to cooperate.

That's all he asked of me. Play ball.

Participate. Collaborate. Cooperate according to God's Law and Love.

Jesus invited the man to play with Him, to collaborate with God,

to join the Lord of the Dance,

to take a risk to see and respond

to neighbors in need all around him, *todo el mundo*.

The only requirement to experience true communion is cooperation...

...and compassion.

The curtain starts to drop on the Second Act.

Jesus moves center stage, calling the man to return to God's Law and Love,  
saying, *"And then come follow me."*

We recognize the Lord's call for cooperation, for engagement,

for total commitment in the here and now as precursor to our ever after.

As the curtain descends we can still see the man's footsteps,

exiting stage left, downhearted, restless, existentially empty.

Hold on! Maybe it's not a tragedy! We don't know yet how it ends!

Resurrection happens every day, everywhere, in everyone!

Intermission is over.

Nothing is more exciting than a life transformed, a community healed.

It's time for the Third Act to begin;

only now the holy script invites our participation.

Collaboration. Cooperation.

There is only one thing we must do first.

How do you think it plays out?

*All power be to the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen!*