

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Homily (Mark 10:17-27)

The Million Dollar Question

In today's Gospel, Jesus is asked the "Million Dollar Question." We see a young man who runs to Jesus and kneels before him. He addresses Jesus as "Good teacher" and then asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" His question is sincere; there is no deceit in this young man. He is not trying to trick Jesus with a rhetorical question for which there is no real answer. His question is a question that is directed to the heart of all human existence. Jesus responds to the question by affirming the good the rich young man has done and then he extends an invitation. The invitation calls for the young man to make a choice, the choice between being merely "good" or "respectable", and being holy.

A Crucial Moment

The difference between "goodness" and "holiness" has been on my mind a great deal lately. Much of this thought has been motivated by the strain I see in our human affairs and relationships...in the obvious evidence of human failure and weakness displayed by our Church leadership...in the constant stream of news highlighting the political bickering and mudslinging present in our political discourse. There is an escalation of tension and hostility between men and women. There is growing anxiety that is crippling many of our young people. With all that is going on, I believe we are approaching a crucial moment of decision; a moment of choice!

The Call to Holiness

Several weeks ago I attended our annual Diaconate Convocation. The keynote speech was about the call to holiness. The speaker warned us that the Catholic Biblical-Sacramental worldview is at odds with the secular worldview of our culture. Sadly, Christ's Church is looking more and more like the world. We were reminded that the Christian mission has always been to bring the world to reflect Christ's Church. That mission will never be realized if those who follow Christ are adopting the standards of the world, as appears to be the case.

The only way that Christ's Church can be what it is called to be is if we embrace God's standard of good. That standard calls for holiness, or living perfect in a Christian sense! The Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 5:48) states this idea powerfully, "You, therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is an incredibly high bar to reach. Speaking personally, I find this standard a daily struggle.

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What does it mean to be Holy?

So what does it mean to be Holy? We are holy only to the degree that we are united to God; that means uniting our heart, mind and will to that of Christ. We need to see others and the world as Christ sees; love as Christ loves; think as Christ thinks; desire as Christ desires.

This is what the rich young man could not do. He was so united to the worldly standard of good that he could not say yes to Christ. He could not accept the invitation to follow Christ. The cost was too high; it was just too much to ask.

United to Christ

There are five qualities or characteristics of holiness that would be visible in a heart united to God:

1. First one would have a yearning for God,
2. From this yearning would follow a developing intimacy with God
3. Intimacy with God is deepened through perseverance in prayer,
4. Prayer helps one develop humility as they confront who they really are in the presence of God.
5. In humility one encounters mercy and love which would intensify ones yearning for God.

A heart united to God, is a heart that desires God so strongly that one could not bear to be outside of His gaze. One would have an intimacy with God where the absolute truth of one's life is laid bare before the Lord. When I think about the saints... when I think about Mary... when I think about Christ... all of these qualities are visible in abundance.

Opening the Font of Grace

We need to open the font of grace that God wants to give us, and we do that by: participating in the sacraments (as witnessed by a daily sacramental life); through the discipline of daily prayer (participating in Liturgy of the Hours, Rosary, Divine Mercy Chaplet, and at the end of the day, the Daily Examen); fasting; regular acts of charity; and good, Godly reading of Scripture and the lives of the Saints.

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One of my personal reading favorites is “The Imitation of Christ” by Thomas A Kempis. He was German-Dutch priest of the Latin rite who wrote (1418 – 1427) one of the most popular books on Christian devotion. His book is loaded with insights on how to grow in holiness and can be read by the chapter, by topic, or by the many short but powerful thoughts contained in each chapter. I am currently re-reading this book for the fourth time, and each time I read it I discover a new habit that needs to be adopted. In each page we can experience the endless mercy and tender forgiveness of God, especially when we cannot live up to the many points contained within it.

The Challenge

Respectability, the worldly goodness embraced by the rich young man, is not enough. When Jesus directs the young man to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, the message he is sending to all of us is that holiness requires more than merely avoiding doing harm to others. Jesus challenges the young man as he challenges each one of us to do more than what is morally respectable. It is a call to stop looking at goodness as simply not doing bad things. It is a call to spend our time, treasure and talent for the benefit of others. Only in answering this call will we find true happiness in time and eternity. We see that in the end, the young man could not meet the challenge; can we?

Do we want it enough?

Christ is inviting us just as he invited the rich young man. How much do we want real Christianity? How much do we want holiness? Do we want it enough to give everything away, or do we suffer from the malady of not wanting enough? We all want the “goodness that is God”, but so few of us want it enough to pay the price.

Jesus looked at him and loved him

In the end, Jesus looked at the rich, young man and loved him. Let’s think about this for a moment. Jesus knew this man’s heart; knew that the rich man loved his wealth more than he loved Jesus, and yet Jesus still looked at him and loved him. Why? Because Jesus was able to see the young man for whom he really was. Jesus saw his lonely heart. Jesus saw the distance he kept from God even as he was keeping the commandments. Jesus saw the enormous energy he spent justifying the life he had chosen to live apart from God. In all of those things, Jesus still loved him. Jesus knows our hearts too. He sees us for who we really are and He still loves us.

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Salvation is a gift.

This story reminds us of an important and powerful truth; salvation is a gift that only God can give. If salvation depended on our own efforts it would be impossible to obtain eternal life. With God's help and His love, however, the impossible becomes possible.

The Million Dollar Question

So here is our Million Dollar Question: Do we want to accept the invitation to follow Christ? If we do accept, there is much to be done. We must unite our heart, mind and will to that of Christ. We must see others and the world as Christ sees. We must love as Christ loves. We must think as Christ thinks. We must desire all that Christ desires. It is only through the saving power of Christ and his redeeming love that we can enter freely into salvation.

The struggle is all too real

We must not delude ourselves... the struggle for holiness is real. It is a day-in and day-out struggle. It is easy to believe that just being good in a worldly sense is being holy, but that is not God's standard of good. It is also important to remember that while the struggle for holiness is real, it is worthwhile. It has heavenly benefits.

It is critical that we understand we are not alone in this struggle. We have each other and we have Christ! As we struggle together, let us help and support one another! Let us look for and demand holiness from each other. Let us pray for one another. Finally, let us ask God to send us His grace to transform us and bless all that we do.