

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.  
Sunday, October 15, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 10:17-31

Now, I might adjust the length of my sermon according to whether or not the seniors are going to sing a song at the end of the service. I was told they might. Will they? Okay, then my sermon will be a little shorter. Can I get an amen for that? That is the only thing Main Street Church will amen is a shorter sermon. I don't know. I don't know. Is it one of the seniors who forgot to go out on the field at some point in the game? I saw it Friday night. Somebody forgot to go out. Was it a senior? Raise your hand. It was. If it was one of you, I was going to tell you I feel your pain. When Coach Dula was my defensive line coach at Woodruff High School, there was a time when I was a senior and I remember being very helpful. Who's supposed to be out there? Who's supposed to be out there? It was me. I wasn't used to starting at defense. I think I only started one game. Just wasn't mean enough to be defense.

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, some of you, if I just preached my sermon as I have laid it out in my outline, you would say what in the world does this have to do with children's Sabbath where we emphasize children, the ministry and needs of children. Well, I'm going to tell a brief story, not from high school days, but from much earlier, back about the third grade. I remember sitting at a lunch table, and there were some girls on one side and boys on the other. They did it that way back in those days. There was a little girl named Sarah, and she wore a very plain dress with some patches on it, and she had a very plain, obvious home haircut. She was just a very plain, ordinary girl. I thought nothing of it, but then my friend, Joey, called her “trash.” I didn't even know what he meant. I knew what trash was. This was a person there. She had begun to silently weep all through lunch, and over the years, I understood that some people are kind of down and out even as early as the third grade. That does tie in with how we pay attention to or ignore the poor, which is something the rich young ruler failed to do.

Again, back to my childhood, I'm dating myself. Some of these players probably don't believe that Coach Dula is old enough to have coached me because I'm old. Back about, I was about nine years old, there was a guy on every Friday night, and I wouldn't miss it, “The Jack Benny Show.” Some of you are old enough to remember Jack Benny. He was famous for two things. He played the violin very badly, and he was cheap. He was tight fisted with his money. There's a story, a skit that he used to do, where the mugger would come up behind him and put a gun to his head, and he said, “Your money or your life!” Like 25, 30, 40 seconds went by, and he'd shake the gun again, and say, “Your money or your life!” Jack Benny said, “I'm thinking! I'm thinking!”

Now, that's amazing that anybody would seriously consider trading their life for money! How foolish is that! Yet, today's Scripture speaks of a man with a sort of illness. He had the illness of over attachment to money. Jesus the healer gave him a prescription. He said, “You just lack one thing. You go and sell all you own and give that money to the poor.

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You’ll have treasure then in Heaven, and after that, you come follow Me.” It is a sort of a healing story, but the man decides to refuse to be healed. This man was very rich the Scripture said. He was at least beyond that, somewhat in touch with his spiritual side. He knew deep in his heart that there must be more to life than power and money, and that’s why he was not fulfilled. He was hungry, and he was looking to Jesus for something more than that.

You know, the Bible is full of stories about people who seek out God and then they turn away. Think back in the Old Testament when Moses was up there on top of Mount Sinai speaking with God, and the children of Israel were gathered around the base, and the glory of God was up there, and the lightning and flashing and all that sort of thing, and Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, but down at the bottom, do you remember what they did? These people – who had just seen God’s mighty power and the plagues and the Passover and a deliverance from slavery in Egypt and they were fed every day by manna from Heaven – these people at the foot of Mount Sinai took off all their jewelry and their gold trinkets, and they melted it down, and they made a golden calf, and they worshiped it! Now, we would never do that! Would we? We would never act as if God didn’t exist and couldn’t see what we do. Would we?

There were two men in a truck. Neither one of them was very bright. They were passing through a small town, and they came to an overpass, and the sign read “11’ 3” Clearance.” They got out and they measured their rig, and it was 12’ 4” tall. They were climbing back into the cab, and one of them said to the other, “What do you think we should do?” Well, the driver looked around, and he shifted it into gear, and he said, “There’s not a cop in sight. Let’s take a chance!”

Well, whether we believe it or not, and whether God is watching or not, we think not sometimes, there are still boundaries that you can’t overcome, that you can’t get around. If we live as if God cannot see, we are at some point going to hit a wall in our faith. We’re going to hit a wall, and we’re going to be forced to either choose or lose. Some choices matter, and some don’t much. What you wear and what you drive and whether you have fish or chicken for lunch, none of that really matters very much, but do I trust Jesus as my Lord and my Savior, who has given me the gift of forgiveness and eternal life? Do I trust Him completely with all that I have and all that I am? That matters.

If we are too attached to things we own, and we confuse our self-worth with what we have at the bank or what we own, then we are spiritually sick. Wealth is either one of two things for everybody. This is a blanket statement, but I truly believe it. It’s one of two things for everybody. It is either a tool that we use, a tool whereby we pay our bills and buy necessities for ourselves, for our families, for our lives. It’s either a tool to use, or it is an idol, which we worship, an idol, which we serve. For the rich young ruler, it seems that his wealth had become his identity. It had become his idol. He confused what it could buy with what he really needed, what he really searched for, and that was real peace and real security.

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I have known in my ministry some tremendously wealthy people, and I can tell you, in my experience, money cannot and has never bought anyone real peace or real security. The only peaceful and spiritually healthy, wealthy people I have known are those who have come to see their wealth as a tool whereby they build up the causes and the concerns and meet the needs that God has led them to meet. Now, wealth is not evil, but if it comes between you and God, it becomes evil. It becomes an idol. If it becomes between you and your family, you and your spouse, you and your children, it would be better if you gave it away than to keep it intact and unspent and die wealthy with no one around your bed. Wealth cannot buy peace of heart or real security, and wealth certainly cannot buy salvation.

We can tell from the way that he asked Jesus the ultimate question that this rich man was presumptuous of the power of wealth. He knelt before Jesus. He knew how to behave. He traveled in the proper circles. He knelt and he tried to butter Jesus up by calling Him good, and Jesus called him on that. He said, “Why do you call me good?” Then he asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It looks to me as if he’s saying; “I already have everything else, now I want to get me some eternal life. How much? What’s the price? Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it, and be on my way.” He thought Heaven was one payment or one deed away. Imagine! Treating God, treating salvation, treating eternal life like one more commodity, one more item that you could earn with a deed or with a price. This man had a spiritual illness. He thought he could somehow make God his debtor, do one more thing or give a certain sum, and then eternal life would just be added to the bottom line of his ledger, one more thing that he owned and he controlled. Boy, was he surprised when he found out that God does not work the same way the world works! No. Far from helping him, his wealth was hurting him. It was distorting his view of reality. It was convincing him of a lie, that God could be bought by a certain sum or by a certain deed done.

Jesus asked him if he had lived a respectable life, and the man answered, “Oh yes, I’ve been good since my youth. I’ve kept the Commandments, most of them.” Now, you’ll notice he said yes only to the Commandments that have to do with the way you treat your neighbor, but he didn’t make any statement at all concerning God and about worshiping only God. At the end of the story, we find out why because he already had a god – with a small g – down at the bank. He thought he was good as most people today think they are good, but all that he had still didn’t make him happy. He hadn’t done any real wrong toward others, but neither had he done anything really right. He hadn’t done much of anything toward others. He had, as the rich fool in the parable Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke, “He has mistakenly thought that his wealth was meant to be all his.” That’s the mistake the rich fool makes in the story in the Gospel of Luke. He thought it was all his. He tore down his barns, and just built bigger barns, and he kept it all.

God grants us wealth to spend wisely, to save wisely, and to give generously. It is entrusted to us only for so many days. With it as a tool, we reveal to God and everybody else our priorities and our faith. We reveal with how we use money whom or what we trust and truly worship. If the one God – with a big G – entrusts wealth into your hands

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and you keep it all, you have indeed done wrong. You have mistaken stewardship for ownership. As Jesus said in Matthew, “For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?” What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? What price? Eternal life. You see, that’s what the man was trying to do. Buy it.

I read it this way. What God wants from us is trust. Do you ultimately trust God or do you trust what you own? Jesus clearly wanted to heal this man of his illness. His illness is affluenza. His affluence has distorted his view of God. He made money bigger and God smaller in his heart. He trusted money most, and he sadly walked away. Jesus offers healing, and he walks away! He is telling this man that yes, you lived a respectable, good life, but you know God is God of the poor people, too. How about helping them out? Jesus saw this man as needing to make a decision about his life, a real decision. He was telling him to make a clean break from idol worship and to worship the true God, who loved both him and his poor children. Jesus wanted him to be free, freed from thinking that being nice and performing some one deed would be enough to earn him salvation! Jesus offered him healing and freedom from that delusion, but because he was so wealthy, he just could not part with it.

For us, for us, maybe it’s not money, maybe it’s not what we have, but Jesus does ask us to decide whom or what we ultimately trust. God wants more than a little tilt in His direction. God wants to be Lord of all we are and all we have. What are you doing, you ask yourself, with God’s gifts to you, the abilities you have, the resources you have, the time and the talents, the body you have? I don’t know, but God knows, and you know, and if you want true peace and true life, God is speaking to you today about what attitudes might be standing in the way between you and your neighbor, you and your family, you and your church, you and your God. We can see this story in the Bible from a great distance about what a stupid choice the rich, young ruler made, but are we brave enough to go a little bit closer in and look at our own hearts and see where our trust is and what our idols might be? Has it even occurred to us that God expects us to share from ourselves with others?

I don’t know what your questions are in your life. I don’t know where each of your empty longings lies. I don’t know your searching questions, but I would like you to be aware that Jesus does, and He does come into those areas of your life with some answers. You must decide what you do with those answers when you get them. If you have an idol, if you have a bitterness, if you have an ungraceful judgment, if you have a sin which drags you down and doesn’t give you anything in return but guilt, if you have a hurt that will not heal because you feel entitled to hurt some more, then it’s time for you to decide whom to trust and what to give away and what you need to throw away in order to gain the peace and the joy that Jesus promised. These things may be for you what wealth was for the rich young ruler. They may be what stand between you and God and between you and other people. These things may make you spiritually sick. When you come to Jesus and ask Him what stands in the way, and you get an answer, you have to decide. You must decide what you will do with the answers He gives. Will you just slightly tilt toward God in your life or will you give Him the full trust with all you are and all you have in this life and in the next? Amen.