

Homily for the 13th Sunday of Luke (25th after Pentecost)

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Sunday, November 29, 2020

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

Today on the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost we listened to the Gospel reading of Saint Luke concerning the young rich man who came to see Christ and ask Him what needed to be done in order to obtain eternal life.

First of all our Lord Jesus Christ tells the ruler that the first requirement for entry into the kingdom of heaven is that he must keep the commandments from the Law of Moses.

He reminds us of the commandments by quoting these to the ruler, that entry into the kingdom of heaven is just as simple as what the Holy Prophet King David said in the Psalms “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.” (Psalm 34:14)

If we look more closely at today’s Gospel reading we notice that Christ only mentions five of the Ten Commandments.

Saint Nikolaj Velimirovic says that our Lord used these five commandments because they had a special significance to this young man. Saint Nikolaj explains them as follows:

“You shall not murder” means that the overpampering of the body with riches and luxury kills the soul.

“You shall not commit adultery” means that the soul is intended for God as a bride for her husband. If it occupies itself with love for worldly riches... then it commits adultery against its immortal Husband God.

“You shall not steal” means that we should not steal from the soul for the body’s benefit.

“You shall not bear false witness” means that we should not in any way justify the love for riches and the neglect of the soul.

“Honour your father and your mother” means that we should not honour only ourselves, but honour our father and mother who brought us into the world, that in this way we may honour God by whom we came into the world.

Unfortunately, we all too often look at the commandments of God as just being simple requirements. We too often consider them as just a checklist.

A checklist, where we tick off the commandments that we have kept and not much more, without paying any particular attention to those commandments. What we do not see, when we look at them in this manner, is the deeper spiritual meaning which is attached to them.

By acting in this manner we are no better than the Pharisee who justified himself before God by saying “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess, and so on.” (Luke 18:12).

Our Lord and saviour notices that the young man is not seeing the deeper spiritual meaning of these commandments. What our Lord and Saviour does next is confronting the rich man with a higher standard of perfection so that he would be able to see the deeper spiritual meaning of the commandments. He says to the young man “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Luke 18:22)

To be perfect, and here it is meant in a purely spiritual manner, one must willingly sacrifice everything and follow Christ. Nothing is gained unless this sacrifice is given freely. The details and the manner of how one follows Christ will be different for each person. It is not a one size fits all sacrifice.

The only way this man would be able to get entry into the kingdom of heaven would be by selling and giving away all his possessions. Saint Chrysostom tells us that giving away possessions is the least of Christ's instructions here; following Him in all things is a far greater and more difficult calling.

What does Saint John Chrysostom mean by these words? In other words, how hard it is for those who become so attached to their riches, so enslaved to their material possessions, that they cannot let go because their possessions have become their god.

Like the young ruler in today's Gospel reading, how many people are there today who really want everything that Christ has to offer them? And what is it that He is offering? He is offering them and us forgiveness, peace, and assurance of life eternal with God. But no, they can not let go of their false gods, their tormenting sins, the god of Mammon.

However, if we look much closer at Christ's words we can see that He does not say that the rich have absolutely no chance to be saved. No, what He is saying is that those who stay attached to their riches, and will not let go of them, cannot be saved.

And this was an immense tragedy for the soul of the young man. He became really sad, full of sorrow, for he had 'great possessions'. In other words, the discerning eyes of Christ saw that the rich young man was not like those disciples who had abandoned their fishing boat in order to follow the Saviour. It was not so much that this man had many possessions, but rather that he was possessed by them, he could not let go of them.

Then Jesus explains to the young ruler, why it will be so hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of Heaven.

"How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Various interpretations have been suggested for the impossible image of a camel going through the eye of a needle: e.g. that the word was not camel but “rope”; or that the eye of a needle was a city gate in Jerusalem, which opened after the main gate was closed at night, through which a camel might barely squeeze if it were first unloaded of all its baggage, with the baggage here symbolising wealth. Even the Talmud uses the expression “for an elephant to go through the eye of a needle”.

Whatever the phrase refers to, it displays the impossibility of salvation for those who are attached to riches. This is clearly evidenced by the response of those who had been listening to the conversation between Christ and the ruler, “Then who can be saved?” Yet by God’s grace, even what is impossible to man can come to pass, for we all know that to God nothing is impossible.

We see the answer to the question “Then who can be saved?” by looking at Christ’s disciples, because they were not bound in their hearts to earthly riches, but only to God.

So we can see through the disciples what our Lord meant when he said “without me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) The apostle Paul further confirms this when he said to the Philippians “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

God wants each of us to invest all that we are and all that we have, in loving and serving Him and our neighbour, so that we may be completely united with Him.

To be liberated is to be independent of all the control of the devil’s glory, and not to allow our possessions to possess us. We must use our possessions as a means of glorifying God. Then we can take up Jesus’ call, “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

It is in the giving to the poor that we receive our treasure in heaven. It is also our brothers and our sisters that are the treasures which we hold on to in Heaven.

It is not just by giving away worldly riches that we obtain treasure in Heaven, for we often think that the two are mutually exclusive. St. Basil the Great writes that “He [Christ], therefore, does not bid us to cast them [meaning our wealth] away as if they were bad, but to distribute them; nor is anyone condemned for possessing them, but for abusing them.”

So what each of us must do is, instead of investing in possessions, property and other material goods, is the following: we must put into our lives an investment of loving and serving mankind so that our Heavenly Father can rejoice in us and will not need to be sorrowful like he was with the young rich ruler.

Amen