

Prayer of the Day

Lord, keep Your household, the Church, in continual godliness, and set us free from all adversities that, under your protection, we may serve you with true devotion and holy deeds; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day

Alleluia. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Alleluia. (Matthew 22:37)

Sermon Text:

This morning, I would like to begin with a test. I found it online. It consists of 8 questions. You're free to write down answers if you wish or to simply keep them in your memory. There will be no grades, and I'm not looking for verbal answers so you're all still safe. Ready? Let's begin.

- What one thing do you most hope for in your future?
- What is the one thing you most worry about losing?
- If you could change one thing about yourself right now, what would it be?
- What thing have you sacrificed the most for?
- Who is there in your life that you feel like you can't forgive, and why?
- When do you feel the most significant?
- What triggers depression in you?
- Where do you turn for comfort when things are not going well?

Got your answers all figured out? Or did you come up with at least a few answers as the questions rattled on? Let me reveal the name of this test. It was called the Idol Detector. I know nasty trick right? However, many theologians including Martin Luther and others have suggested that our deepest emotions, comforts and cares in life are excellent indicators of idols lurking in the shadows of our lives.

Today in our lesson, a rich ruler approaches Jesus and attempts to test His knowledge. What he gets is a quick lesson of His own which provides us an opportunity to rejoice again that by the grace of God, you and I can do even what we might say is impossible. Let's dig in.

Luke 18:18–30

¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’” ²¹ “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said. ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. ²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, 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.” ²⁶ Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus replied, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” ²⁸ Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!” ²⁹ “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.” – NIV84

¹⁸ *A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* The question of our ruler is not uncommon even today but it already shows a lack of true knowledge of God.

¹⁹ *“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. “What must I do” betrays a lack of the humble knowledge of faith which knows any “must” is bust before a holy God. Jesus tells him as much as He focuses on the word “good” (interestingly enough the ruler hits on some truth even though he had not intended it).*

²⁰ *You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”* Jesus now aims him in the direction of the commandments. After all, who can keep all of those? I’m always a bit embarrassed for the ruler as he replies to Jesus.

²¹ *“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.* Already Jesus has uncovered the first idol. Did you catch it? Arrogance, selfishness, pride, they all really point to a rather self-centered idol on the throne of the heart.

²² *When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”* Jesus delivers the hammer blow of the Law now. It must be done! We will never seek to be rid of an idol unless we first know it is there. He even tells him how to deal with it. Remove it completely from your life, and then replace it with the only thing that truly belongs in the place of worship.

²³ *When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.* ²⁴ *Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, 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.”* The idol has been exposed the man is saddened and perhaps even embarrassed but the saddest part of our lesson is that he seems to show us no intent of dealing with any of the issues Jesus has shown him.

I know how I have always viewed this section of scripture. I wonder if it isn’t at least a bit like how many would view it. I look at it in the same way the ruler saw the commands of God. “Oooh, it’s no good when people do that. Good thing I never have.” Ouch, right God grimaces at my lack of knowledge and my inability to see the very thing He has set before me. “No one is good except God.” So Jesus roots it out He speaks to one of the richest nations with one of the most overwhelming accumulations of stuff our world has ever seen and he hits us right between the eyes. *How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!*

But I suppose we may still like to think of ourselves as middle class or as people who have no issues with money, and maybe we’re even right there so back to those questions from before. Let’s apply Jesus’ test here to those situations. ²⁹ *If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.* ³⁰ *And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell* (Matthew 5:29-30). What were the answers to those questions? Family, Success, Recreation, Knowledge, Personal Advancement sell it, cut it off throw it out. Ready to riot? Before you do I’m not advocating that you actually obliterate those blessings but God does demand that they be kept in their proper place and if the balance isn’t correct then you have made an idol a god other than the one true God. *Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for an idolater to enter the kingdom of God.*

Can we pass the test of the rich ruler? When Jesus investigates to find out where our hearts truly lie and therefore whom we are really following is the answer God or some man-made replacement for Him? As the law of our God tears us to pieces, we find the question resurfacing, only this time with more earnestness and haste, *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* How do I get my hands on the treasure chests of heaven Jesus mentioned?

We are not alone in the feeling that is welling up within us. *Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"* The question is quite simple isn't it? Jesus' all-or-nothing look at idolatry kills every human being doesn't it? Of course, it does, and that's the point. Paul once told the Romans, ¹⁹ *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.* ²⁰ *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin* (Romans 3:19-20).

Our own sinfulness and hopelessness exposed, Jesus now points the way to forgiveness and life. *Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."* And there we have the answer to the question asked by our self-absorbed ruler and echoed by those standing around Jesus. What we could never do on our own, God does for us! In fact, now we have an example of that. ²⁸ *Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!"* ²⁹ *"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God* ³⁰ *will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."* Irony that it's Peter who pipes up. Peter, who will follow Jesus at a distance into the courtyard. Peter, who will love life and limb more than Christ when confronted by the servant girl there. But Peter, who will be restored by Jesus after sprinting to the tomb. Peter, who will be instrumental in the work which builds up the Christian Church in a pretty hostile world. Peter, who will, if the Church's tradition is anywhere near correct, give life on a cross of his own rather than turn away again because He has seen his Savior, experienced His love, knows forgiveness, life and salvation belong to him.

Yep, it's Jesus, Jesus only Jesus again, isn't it? That's exactly why God would pull us from the idols which are but poor imitations of divinity. It's because only one God saves. That's a truth both Moses and John trumpet in our other lessons today. After being stripped of any self-worth by the law, God supplies perfect righteousness through His Son and the life He lived for us. Condemned with the idols we so often worship, Jesus endured the punishment for us on the cross. And while we don't deserve it, in the resurrection, Jesus assures us that the keys of heaven rest within our hands, and with them come the true treasures which await us there.

All of this God holds out to us, not in green papers or gold bars nor in the accolades of crowds impressed with our prowess athletic or academic. He holds it out in simple means as we hear His Son in frail paper pages. It washes over us in simple water and powerful Word. It is given and poured out for us in unassuming earthly elements.

Yes, in Christ, through faith in Him, you and I pass the test every time. Focused on Him, made followers by grace and through faith, the idols are replaced not by cheap imitations but by ultimate realities. No wonder He urges us to set aside everything else and pursue him. O God, forever help us to follow you! Help us do what we know on our own is impossible! Amen!