

Sermon: “Who then can be saved?”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In today's Gospel, we hear of the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks Him what he must do to gain eternal life. Truly, this is the question that we all ask, and that we all MUST ask everyday: The question of eternal life is the one thing needful for this world will pass but only what we do in Christ and for Christ will last.

After the young man asks what he must do, he receives from Christ the answer: Keep the commandments: love God, love your neighbor, honor your father and mother, etc...essentially, all the things that our God given conscience reminds us of everyday. The young man's first mistake was saying that he did all these things already (and therefore asked in his conceit,) what next? If he made a real and deep search of himself, like we should do as well, he would probably have found that he, like us, maybe hasn't done all of these things and that maybe there is still some work to be done for the commandments of God are a boundless abyss that liken us to God Himself and truly only one could perform to perfection: the God-man, our Lord Jesus Christ. If we think that we, like the young man, have kept all the commandments, the Lord responds for us to give something even greater: Give all you have to the poor and follow me....And at this statement, the rich man went away, because he could not fulfill this.

Christ essentially humbled that man with a very difficult request, that very man who thought he was deserving and ready to receive the gift of eternal life. After the rich man went away, humbled and unable to fulfill the Lord's command, Jesus turned to the disciples, saying: How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom....(He did not say impossible, for we have many Saints who had great wealth, including Emperors, Princes, and Patriarchs.) The Lord said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Let us take this parable to a different level: We, whether we have money or not, can be construed as the rich man if we come to Christ saying that we are already wealthy in keeping the commandments, in doing good, and doing all those things that are the narrow and difficult way that leads to life. Hence, we consider that we are not spiritually poor/needy in the least. (However, we must remember that in the beatitudes, being poor in spirit is the first step to the Kingdom.) Essentially, we are wealthy according to the parable with conceit and self-opinion, considering that we have already arrived...that some how we are already perfected, and not in need of God's help and mercy. It is precisely this person for whom it will be impossible to enter into the Kingdom.

True spiritual life begins when we see our poverty, our need of God's strength and His mercy. This vision of our weakness is how God's strength is made perfect in us and it is how we find it and begin to rely on it. However, if we have an exalted opinion of ourselves, we will be quick to criticize others, to judge others and to proclaim all kinds of pronouncements on those who might actually be blameless. This exalted opinion of ourselves not only destroys us spiritually and makes it very hard (if not impossible) for us to even begin a spiritual life, but also destroys those around us! Our words can either be words of life or our words can be words of death. With our words we can build up others and our community or with our words we can destroy others and our community and this all proceeds from thinking that we are rich in spiritual things and therefore have a delusional self-exalted conceit that is ruinous to everything that we come into contact with.

Unless we repent/change, humble ourselves and stop criticizing and judging everyone

and everything (except ourselves, which is the only person we should be judging) it will be very hard if not impossible for us to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We will arrive on that great and last day of our life before the Throne of God shocked and dismayed when we see the truth about who we are, who we have destroyed and how we have truly failed to live a Christian life that builds up others, that edifies and loves others and that always seeks to see the good and not the bad. However, we must not and cannot seek any of this from others: only we ourselves can take responsibility for fixing this in our own lives. If we see our neighbors destroying themselves and others with their words and gossip, it is to God that they must answer and not to us. It is for us to take responsibility for ourselves, to act in love (which means to always will the highest good for others) and to put all of our energy into praying for everyone: for those who wrong us, for those who love us, and for those who lead us and guide us instead of criticizing and judging¹. And, at the very least, we can close our mouths.

St. Silouan explains to us the shortest and easiest way to salvation: “Be obedient (to God) and sober, do not find fault, and keep mind and heart from evil thoughts. Think that all men are good and beloved of the Lord. For such humility the grace of the Holy Spirit will dwell in you, and cause you to exclaim, 'How merciful is the Lord!'”

But if you find fault and are querulous, if you want your own way, even if you pray much your soul will fail, and you will cry out, "The Lord has forgotten me!" But it is not that the Lord has forgotten you—it is you who have forgotten that you must humble yourself, and so the grace of God abides not in your soul. Into the humble soul, now, this grace enters with ease, affording her peace and rest in God.”

This Gospel ends with hope for us all, for no matter where we are today, it tells us that even though it may be very hard or nearly impossible on a human level for us to enter the Kingdom, it is not impossible with God: for with God, the Scriptures tell us, all things are possible. Let us beseech the One Who is able to help us, to heal us, to strengthen us, and to show us the truth about ourselves. Let us strive to be poor in spirit, to humble ourselves, to see our poverty, not to claim to be a blameless keeper of the commandments but rather, let us seek to see ourselves as we truly are before God. Let us not be like the rich man, puffed up with self-conceit and self assurance, criticizing, judging and condemning those whom we might make a false judgment about. Rather, let us build up our neighbors and our communities with positive, life giving words and actions. Let us repent of the past and move forward, working for a positive change today that is possible with the One through Whom all things are possible: our God, The Trinity, to Whom be all glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ St. Theophan tells us that if we see something wrong in another and judge them and that judgment however leads us to have compassionate prayer for that person's amendment rather than to reproach them privately or publicly, then this kind of judgment is acceptable to God, for out of love we seek what is ultimately best for the person.