

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“GETTING THE INHERITANCE”

Mark 10:17-31

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Analysis by Michael Hoy

17As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 18Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.” ‘ 20He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ 21Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ 22When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ 24And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ 26They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ 27Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things

are possible.’ 28Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ 29Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age-houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions-and in the age to come eternal life. 31But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

DIAGNOSIS: Working, but Not Inheriting

Step One: Initial Diagnosis : *Having Many Possessions*

The man who ran up to Jesus seemed to have it all. He had wealth and many possessions, and a life that many of us would classify as “good”: faithful to the commandments of the second table of the Law from his youth. What a worker he has been! And he worked hard all his life, so we might think he deserved everything he got. What more could he want? Well, there is one more thing: eternal life. And as has been his custom, he’s willing to pay for it the way he always has: by his own “doing.” “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” His question betrays his folly-not only by focusing on his own effort, but never really grasping that an inheritance is just that: you either have it or you don’t. He doesn’t, but he sure is trying hard to get his hands on it.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis : *Lacking*

What he finds with Jesus, however, is that the price tag is more than he can bear. “You lack one thing,” Jesus says, “Sell what you own, and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (v. 21). We ought not get so absorbed in thinking that it is in our shedding of wealth

and possessions that eternal life can be earned (as Peter thought). That is the same problem. The issue is thinking that what we have earned in life helps us to earn our way into the new life. For the rich man, this indication of lack leaves him shocked and grieving, leading him to turn his back on Jesus and go away. For Peter and the other disciples who try to earn by giving up, they also share in this faithlessness: perplexed and astounded. Our heart betrays that we want to add on to God's gift by doing, rather than truly subtract by losing and clinging to faith's promise. Do we still have our possessions and the supposed "good" life that comes by doing? Yes; but it doesn't have Jesus-and therefore, it doesn't have the inheritance either.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis : *Hard Look before God*

What we do have is the impossibility of making ourselves right with God by what we earn. "How hard it is [for one who has riches] to enter the kingdom of God!" (v. 23). Jesus says. So with God it is hard luck; and a hard look (vv. 21, 23). Eternal life? Impossible!

PROGNOSIS: Getting the Inheritance by Faith

Step Four: Initial Prognosis : *The Loving Look of Christ*

But "for God all things are possible" (v. 27). The gospel was there for the man (and for us) but he couldn't see it. Maybe his back was already turned, on to the next venture or challenge that he "must do." But "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (v. 21). Ultimately, the inheritance of eternal life comes when God inherits us-by Jesus' doing, his loving us. And that becomes clearest when he loses all for us on the cross; this is worth more than any look of love he can give, or promise and benefits of "treasures in heaven" he bestows.

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis : *Faith that Never Lacks*

Faith trusts what Christ has done, not what we can do. Faith

embraces Jesus' invitation to follow him, which really means to trust him (not to earn our way, as much "discipleship" talk these days confuses "faith" with again "what we must do"). Faith journeys with Jesus to the cross where he does for us, and trusting him alone that through him and his cross we are inherited and therefore inheritors of eternal life.

Step Six: Final Prognosis : *Having It All by Faith*

In losing, we gain because of the One we dare to lose with: Jesus the Christ. Putting the least and the last first is our new agenda. It does not conform to the world's way of earning by climbing. In fact, this new (truly new) agenda may only gain persecutions when done for the sake of Christ and his gospel. But what you get is "houses, and brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, [and yes,] with persecutions-and in the age to come eternal life" (v. 30). Faith trusts that there is more "good" to come.