

The story in Mark's gospel, this morning, tells of a wealthy person who tried his best to be righteous, obeying the commandments of God to the best of his ability. This is no easy thing, and it is something that we ought not to dismiss, lightly. For a Jew, then and now, righteousness, before God and man, was a very important thing. If a person truly cared about the state of his soul, he strove with all his being to be righteous and, for a Jew, righteousness was determined by obedience to Torah: the books of Moses, that is, the books of religious law.

Mark tells us that the man in this story was wealthy, by inference of the upper class and, by further inference, well educated in Torah. We must assume that he knew the law like the back of his hand and that he followed the law to the best of his ability. These assumptions make the dialogue between him and Jesus interesting. He called Jesus "good," which is to say, in Jewish understanding, "truly righteous." Jesus disputed this, saying that only God the Father is good. We don't know what to do with this, because Christians believe that Jesus was perfectly righteous. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, in the New Testament, tells us that Jesus was subject to temptation in every way that we are, yet he did not sin. If Jesus was not "good," in other words, "righteous," then who is? But, to get back to this passage, the Lord went on to say to the man, "You know the commandments, you know what is required." To which the rich man responded, "I have followed the Law from my youth." The exchange suggests that both knew that something was missing, but what could it be if you were obedient to the commandments? Where did this rich fellow fail? His own sense of righteous shortfall brought this man, on his knees, to Jesus. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer was, sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and follow Jesus.

From the time of Mark's gospel, some have heard this as a condemnation of wealth. That's certainly easy to understand when you have St. Mark telling us that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. I don't think that was the Lord's point at all, and to take this as a condemnation of wealth is to miss a crucially important point. What Jesus was saying is that this man let concern for his worldly goods get in the way of truly righteous living. His material things were of greater importance to him than spiritual things. In another place, Jesus was asked which of God's commandments was greatest. His response was nearly identical to that of Rabbi Hillel, an influential contemporary of Jesus. The greatest commandment, both said, is to love God. Everything else, they both said, is nothing but commentary on that one commandment.

What this boils down to, for the rich man in the story today and for each and every one of us is that if something gets in the way of loving God and following Christ, then you must

set that thing aside. If you don't, you can't follow Jesus, because the way of the Cross is a route of living that takes total focus. The way of the Cross is a way of absolute commitment, and anything less is simply inadequate. I don't think this gospel passage is a condemnation of wealth; it is a condemnation of being a halfway Christian or a sometime Christian. I think that the passage is a continuation of the theme from several weeks ago, when we were told that if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! The early Christian writers, who gave us the New Testament, used strong, graphic language because Jesus used strong, graphic language, language that we remember. The bottom line is that the state of one's soul is the most important thing, and anything that impairs one's relationship with God, through Christ, ought to be set aside. We are told that we should not hold back. Where your treasure is, there your heart is, also.

I think that this passage speaks to everyone of us, because it is our nature to cling to our treasures, whatever they may be, but this propensity that we all have to hold things back from God is where our spiritual rubber meets life's road. The things that we hold back, the things that become stumbling blocks to a devout and holy life, are the things that keep us from true discipleship. It is good that we examine them, honestly, courageously set them aside and walk more closely with our Lord.

Christianity is not an easy religion. A Christian life is a life of self denial, generosity to those less fortunate and devotion to God. But it is the appropriate life for those who would dwell in the eternal presence of God. *Amen.*