

THE RICH YOUNG MAN (Mark 10:17-30)

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Some Catholics think that all they have to do to get to heaven is follow the commandments because isn't that what the Church tells us God expects from us? That's what the rich young man thought, too. Jesus asked him if he followed the commandments, so when he answered, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth,"¹ he probably thought that he had hit the jackpot—eternal life. But he was sadly mistaken because Jesus told him that there was still something more that he had to do. And as we know, he walked away sad because he wasn't willing to sacrifice his earthly possessions for the sake of something far better. He was probably an upright and righteous man but he was also a man, who led a very comfortable life very attached to the things of this world. He kept the commandments, but in his heart, "what must I do to inherit eternal life" really meant "what do I **have to do** to get to heaven?" It was that legalistic manner of thinking typical of many under the Old Covenant—If I faithfully observe all of these external practices, then I will be counted among the righteous.

Many Catholics think in a way very similar to the young man. "What do I **have to do** to get to heaven?" Follow the commandments. Go to Mass every Sunday. Know your catechism. Pray the Rosary every day. All very good and necessary things for anyone, who wishes to reach heaven but is this all that God wants from us? The answer is found in Jesus' statement to the young man: "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me."²

One can die in the state of sanctifying grace but yet languish in Purgatory for a very long time because, while avoiding serious sin, the soul died nonetheless still very attached to this world. Although destined for heaven, the soul must still be cleansed of every earthly attachment and imperfection before it will be worthy to enter the perfection of heaven. For, the essence heaven is the union of the soul with the One Eternal God, entering into the very life of the Trinity itself, in what has sometimes been called the mystical marriage. And if God is all-perfect, then union with Him is impossible until all imperfections are washed away. That is essentially what Purgatory is all about. We can, therefore, work out our Purgatory in this life, freeing ourselves from those attachments, which are incompatible with God's nature so that upon death nothing of our earthly life will encumber total union with God. But if we don't, we will still have to work it out on the other side of the grave. We have a choice.

So, as long as we are holding on to a piece of this world, we can't rise up to heaven. Just as water and oil don't mix, we won't be able to endure the glorious perfection of God as long as worldly imperfections remain within us. And because we are imperfect fallen creatures, this process of detachment from the world must necessarily be a gradual process, which we must work out in stages during the course of our life, just as God had to show mankind the road back to Him through progressive stages after Adam had rejected Him. The Old Law, summed up in the commandments, was the first stage of this process but it was an incomplete and limited remedy to man's fallen nature because it could only heal certain symptoms of the disease. It couldn't go to the root and cure it. It was only with the coming of Christ, who showed man that what was most important was not the laws themselves but conversion of heart. That was what Christ was trying to tell

the rich young man. That he would have to convert his heart, and that this wouldn't happen unless he first released himself from the bonds of his earthly possessions.

Christ talked about money and material possessions but it was just the first step because detachment from things of the world merely begins with the physical. But then, Christ told the man “come follow me,” so that after being released from those things which were outside of him, the man, in giving himself totally to Christ could free himself from his internal possessions—himself. For, if one wants to inherit eternal life, a person can't stop with detachment only from material goods but it also must extend to the possessions of the soul—our feelings, our intellect, our will, which have an even great hold on us than material possessions. If we expect to “become perfect as our Father is perfect”³ we have to also divest ourselves of them, so that we can conform our thoughts, desires, and will totally and only to that of God Himself. Until we do this, there will still be a barrier, which will prevent us from crossing over to Him.

This total emptying of ourselves, as described by great spiritual writers such as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, cleanses the soul of imperfections in order to conform it more fully to God with whom it will be perfectly united for all eternity. These purgations of the soul, as they are called, divest the soul of its most cherished possessions—the attachment of a person to himself. For those willing to let God purify them yet in this life, they come to know themselves better by recognizing their own lowliness and misery, which they were unable to see when they were still so in love with themselves. God begins to heal the soul of its many imperfections and wipe away the stains of the “old man” just as we wash away dirt with soap and cleansers. Sometimes, they are so deeply engrained that we have to scrub long and hard in order to get them out

completely. And this process can sometimes be very painful, for we come to the full realization of how deep seeded they are in our soul.

St. John of the Cross wrote this about the process of purification of the soul. Before the Divine fire of God's love "unites and transforms the soul in itself, [it] first purges it of all its contrary qualities. It drives out its unsightliness, and makes it black and dark, so that it seems worse than before and more unsightly and abominable than it was wont to be. For this Divine purgation is removing all the evil and vicious [dispositions] which the soul has never perceived because they have been so deeply rooted and grounded in it; it has never realized, in fact, that it has had so much evil within itself."⁴

This may sound a bit harsh because we tend to think of "evil" as something radically wicked and immoral. But this was the way that medieval man described anything that was not in conformity with God. For if evil is the absence of good, and God is all-good, then anything that doesn't conform with God's nature is evil, no matter how small. Growing in sanctity is, therefore, merely being purged of all that is contrary to God, so that we can become like Him.

St. John of the Cross describes this process by means of a vivid analogy. God purges and prepares the soul for perfect union with Him "in the same way as fire acts upon a log of wood in order to transform it into itself; for material fire, acting upon wood, first of all begins to dry it, by driving out its moisture and causing it to shed the water which it contains within itself. Then it begins to make it black, dark and unsightly, and even to give forth a bad odour, and, as it dries it little by little, it brings out and drives away all the dark and unsightly [properties] which are contrary to the nature of fire. And,

finally, it begins to kindle it externally and give it heat, and at last transforms it into itself and makes it as beautiful as fire.”⁵

We usually don't realize how many imperfections and faults reside within us and how attached we are to them. That's why the process of rooting them out can be as painful as the fire acting upon the log. But the only way that leads to life eternal and the union of the soul with God is the straight and narrow way of the total purification of our soul by purging it of all attachments to this world. So few persevere because they can't endure to detach themselves from the world and from themselves. That's why Jesus told His disciples that it's as difficult as a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

God wants us to adhere to His commandments but this is only the starting point. If we are to be united to Him in life eternal, then we need to strip ourselves of all possessions, that is, attachments to things of this world, even to denying ourselves, so that we can be totally like Him, so that we, the log, can be transformed by the fire of God and one day glow in the glory of heaven as beautifully as the fire Himself.

¹ Mark 10:20.

² Mark 10:21.

³ Matthew 5:48.

⁴ Peers, E. Allison, transl., St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (Image Books, Doubleday: New York, 1990), 128.

⁵ Peers, *Dark Night*, 127.