

If You Want To Be Perfect

Matthew 19:16-26

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it 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." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

Some day, I'll probably end up writing a book of all the weird things that happened to me just while doing my job. Don't worry; none of you has yet earned an entire chapter for yourself.

At this point, I think I'll have an FAQ chapter, answering all the questions I get asked frequently.

Questions like: 'what exactly do you do Monday through Saturday?' and 'will God really forgive anything I do?'

Lots of the questions I get fall into the general category of 'what do Methodists believe.' Any of you who have asked me a question like that know that there is never a simple or short answer. In large part because part of what it means to be United Methodist is to work out the details of your faith for yourself. Some churches are black-and-white churches. For every issue, there is a right and wrong way to think, believe and act. Some churches, like ours, are more grey-area churches. For every issue, there are well-thought-out arguments on at least two sides, often more. But it's up to you to discern which you think is the best answer. One of the things I love about our Scripture reading this morning is that Jesus gives such black-and-white answers while at the same time dealing with the grey areas in between.

Our story opens when someone comes up to Jesus and asks, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" That's a pretty presumptuous question, really. This man is looking for a

checklist for how to get into heaven. If he has already done what Jesus tells him, then he can relax, because he's got that covered. If he hasn't done it, he'll add it to his priority list, and then he will relax. But you get the sense he's looking to take care of this whole 'heaven thing' so that he can just get on with the rest of his life without worrying about God.

And Jesus gives him a nice, simple answer. "Keep the commandments, and you will enter into life." Okay. But we have the 10 commandments, and we also have the 613 other commandments scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And we know that it's essentially impossible to keep all 613 perfectly. So he clarifies with Jesus by asking, "Which of those commandments do I have to keep?"

Part of me really wishes Jesus would have smacked this guy and said, "All of them, duh." But Jesus is more patient than I am. So he lists five of the 10 commandments Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother. And then, for good measure, Jesus adds one more. One from that list of 613: love your neighbor as yourself.

Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus summarizes all the commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures by saying, "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." So why here does he give five of the 10 commandments? Well, the young man who approached Jesus did ask for a checklist. And while it's pretty easy to know whether or not you've murdered or stolen, these are not one-time things. 'You shall not murder' is a lifelong commitment. While this initially looks like a black-and-white answer, it's really more complicated than that. Because in addition to four commands to refrain from particularly immoral actions, Jesus includes two commands of things to proactively do. Honor your parents, and love your neighbor. That's not something you can ever cross off your to-do list. And how do

you know when you've honored your parents enough? Isn't there always one more thing, one more way you can show love to your neighbor?

It would seem that Jesus has given this young man enough to do and think about for the rest of his life. But he is a black-and-white thinker. So he presses Jesus. He says, "I've done all that already. Isn't there something else I should do?" Clearly, this young man hasn't yet realized that loving your neighbor is an ongoing process, one that takes your full attention for the rest of your life. So Jesus spells it out for him by giving him just one specific example. "Really? You've done all that? Good for you. But if you really want to be perfect, then sell everything you have, and give the money to the poor."

At this point, most of us who have lots of possessions and at least a reasonable amount of money get pretty nervous. Well, Jesus was just talking to this one guy, right? This is only if we want to be perfect, right? We get defensive and anxious, and we stop listening. There was one more part to this instruction. Step one: sell everything you have. Step two: give the money to the poor. Step three: did any of you catch it? Jesus says, "Come and follow me."

Throughout the Scriptures, God lets us know that he wants to be first in our lives. It should be obvious that God wants to be more important to us than anything we picked up at Target. But you could sell everything you own and give away the money, and still not be any closer to the kingdom of God. You could give away money because it's one more item on a check list, or you could give away money because it's how to love God and love your neighbor.

Loving your neighbor, the last commandment Jesus told the man to keep, is not a checklist commandment. It is an ongoing way of life. The young man couldn't see that. So Jesus gave him another command – sell everything you have. In theory, that's a one-time event. But consider your own life. Could you do that? Go home today and sell everything you have? Jesus

knew the young man was finally likely to understand the concept that following Jesus is not about accomplishing a set of tasks. It's about changing the way you live your life. I invite you to give because we live in a world where some people desperately need to receive. But I also invite you to give because God has invited us to give. God created us to be in relationship with one another, and we can't truly be in relationship with others as long as we are watching out only for ourselves.

That's why one of the spiritual practices that helps us connect with God is generosity. Giving connects us with one another, and ultimately, also with the one who made and loves each one of us. And I want to give you options for your homework this week. Because although giving is a spiritual practice, it's also a very personal one. You have to decide for yourself how much you can give, and most of us prefer to choose where we give our money. After all, God does love a cheerful giver, not a reluctant or bitter one.

So I have two ways for you to consider being generous this week as your homework. First, today we are celebrating One Great Hour of Sharing. One Great Hour supports UMCOR, the relief organization of the United Methodist Church. When a crisis happens, or when someone wants to be generous, their gifts go fully toward helping people in need. Every dollar, 100%, is used in ministry. Today, Methodists around the world stand up and take ownership of our relief agency by raising, largely in one day, the funds we need to pay salaries and keep the lights on. So one way to practice generosity this week is to contribute to One Great Hour of Sharing. It's a gift that gives twice, really. First, you help cover overhead and administrative costs. But second, you enable someone else to give 100% of their gift to someone in need.

But The United Methodist Church is reaching out to help people all the time. Sometimes there are ongoing ministry needs that don't result from a crisis or emergency. Who helps them

when UMCOR can't? We can't fix everything, but working as a group of nearly 6 million people around the world, we are making a visible, tangible difference. Our Nothing But Nets program, done in conjunction with Sports Illustrated, has had a huge impact in eliminating malaria. Closer to home, we have worked with churches and organizations to drastically reduce poverty in some long-suffering communities.

Wish you could be part of that? You already are. Every United Methodist congregation joins in our ministry as a whole by participating in connectional giving. Each of us contributes to our pooled financial resources, which is then the source of our ongoing budget as a national and global church. Sure, some of it is used for administrative costs, but most of it is used to spread the love of God. And you can contribute your fair share of these connectional gifts by contributing just \$110 per member. If each member of Crossroads contributed \$110 toward our connectional giving, we would be able to pay our apportioned amount of nearly \$20,000. You'll be getting a letter next week explaining this in more detail, so you can also choose this as a way to practice generosity.

Jesus tells us this morning that if we want to find eternal life, we have to follow the commandments. But if we want to be perfect, if we want to be perfected, we have to follow him. Loving people in the name of God requires ongoing support. It requires that we make giving not a one-time thing to cross off our checklist. It means we have to cultivate a lifestyle of generosity. Following Jesus, making his way of living our way of living, is hard. One might say it's almost as hard as trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle. If it's that hard, how will we ever stand a chance? Why even bother trying? Jesus says that with God, even things that seem impossible can happen. Amen and amen.