**Sermon Proper 23**

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**Text:** *Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful… (Mark 10:17-22)*

As I reflect on today’s Gospel lesson involving The Rich Young Man, I remember being a young man discussing it with my family at home. As one can well imagine, his passage has been much abused throughout the ages. My parents made sure to properly explain what Jesus meant in letting that young man go on his unhappy way. He trusted in his wealth more than in God.

Although this young nobleman idolized his worldly status and great possessions (Mark 10:22), his unbelieving attitude may pertain to many things we hold dear. The book of Proverbs opens this way: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.” (Pr 3:5-7) The Sixty-Second Psalm is a prayer directed against envy and contentiousness: problems that arise from ill-placed security that may vanish at any time: “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. Put no trust in extortion; set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, set not your heart on them.” (Ps 62:8-10) On this point, again, the lad fell short.

Of course, the rich young man did not see it that way, seeming incapable of proper self-examination. When Jesus lists the commandments – particularly the Second Table of the Law, which concerns loving our neighbour – he responds confidently: “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” (Mark 10:20) Insightful commentators have drawn out a nuance in his encounter with our Lord. Although he claimed to have kept the Ten Commandments, he failed to observe the first and most important one: “You shall have no other gods.” What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. The Second Table is anchored in the First Table: love of God.

Bl. Martin Luther observes, “This is exactly the meaning and right interpretation of the first and chief commandment, from which all the others proceed … Wherever a man’s heart has such an attitude toward God, he has fulfilled this commandment and all the others.” (LC I 324) On the other hand, Luther would have us confront our manifold idols. “So, too, if anyone boasts of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor, and trusts in them, he also has a god, but not the one, true God. Notice, again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people become because of such possessions, and how despondent when they lack them or are deprived of them. Therefore, I repeat, to have a God properly means to have something in which the heart trusts completely.” (10)

Jesus confronts the nobleman with an exhortation: “go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (v. 21) This is neither a new law nor an “evangelical counsel” – in sum, a work on which to ground our hopes for earning God’s favour. It is a stern rebuke and call to self-examination. He could not follow the Lord with a clean conscience. Those who have been properly convicted, however, those wishing to leave behind contentious attitudes, vain hopes, and self-righteousness, already have just this thing: treasure in heaven. We who have been baptized into the Triune God have all we need. Freedom, security, and peace that last to eternity. “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.” (Ps 62:1-2)