

Mark 10:17–22

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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The texts for Pentecost 20 all collect around the First Commandment, which makes them challenging and a lot of fun. This isn't unusual, even if it isn't often recognized. The First Commandment is the clasp that holds the wreath together. As Luther said, it is the commandment of all commandments, the one that summarizes the Ten Commandments, and Luther is bold enough to say that at the same time it summarizes all of Scripture. It does so because, as he put it, it is the commandment in which nothing is commanded and everything is promised: commandment and promise at the same time. How's that for distinguishing law from gospel? They're right there in the same words. So when we come to these texts, we can see the First Commandment popping up in each of them, as you would expect, just as it pops up through all Scripture. This time we get to pay close attention to it in one of the great dialogues in the whole of Mark's Gospel, something very much like what we'd expect in John's Gospel, when Jesus is in conversation with Nicodemus or with the leaders of the Jews or whomever. So, a lot of fun.

We'll work our way through the supporting texts first. Amos is here to tempt all the peace-and-justice pietists, who are convinced that all the rest of us are pietists and that they alone lack piety, and that they alone, with all their peace-and-justice rigmarole, ought to be listened to and should control the church. I once heard Mark Hanson describe the rest of us as pietists. If you believe that, I've got some land in Florida for you. What a lot of fun.

Anyway, Amos is here, and he is a great temptation to lambaste the whole congregation. One of my favorite stories is about the son of a former president of the Board of Regents at Luther, who really is a kid even still. He was going to seminary in those days, and he went to a circle meeting and identified the cows of Bashan: those big-breasted old women sitting right in front of him. He said he got it in the ear, and I think he probably deserved it at a lower point in the anatomy. So Amos is a temptation, especially if you're a little ticked off at the congregation, and we're going to have to be real careful and tiptoe around him so we don't get too wild.

Then we've got a wonderful psalm that turns the First Commandment into a prayer. And for once in a lifetime, and hopefully more often than that, the consecutive reading of Hebrews actually correlates quite well, in a fascinating text addressing the problem we looked at last week in Hebrews: people sliding away, losing interest. We'll have to look at that quite carefully. It's quite a sophisticated discussion of unbelief.

And then we get Jesus at his very best in the Gospel. Holy smokes! You don't want to tangle with him. This is the conversation with the rich man. I always figure he's Jaycees Man of the Year, with a shelf full of awards for realizing his potential. And now he thinks eternal life is a project he can take on and achieve like all the rest. "Look at this; I earned it. Too bad for the rest of you. I'll campaign for the Tea Party and kick out all you guys who haven't achieved your potential and gotten salvation in the bank." So we'll watch Jesus deal with this. It's more fun than ought to be legal, watching Jesus tinker with him. He's just playing with him, enticing him, leading him on, and then, wham, the door slams and he has his foot trapped right in it. So we'll spend a little time with that conversation too. I just love that text.

Amos 5: Out of Correlation with Life

First, the supporting texts: Amos 5:6–7, 10–15. Here are both promise and command. Amos's argument is based on the premise that God is life. That is, God as Creator is the one who has life in himself. In the faith of the church we take the *ego eimi* saying from John's Gospel: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Jesus has life in himself. He is one with the Triune God; he is the Triune God in the flesh, and so life breathes in him. God is life, just as Jesus is life. And because God is life, to be misaligned with God, to be out of keeping with God, to live in a broken relationship with God, is to run afoul of the source of life, and that, of course, is death. So in the first portion of the text Amos sets out God as the power of life, and in the second he draws the consequence of disobedience: death.

Justice and righteousness are the correlates of life. Now we have to be careful with the word "justice." My grandpa said there were two things you should never pray for: one is justice and the other is rain. If you pray for justice, you'll get it, and you'll discover that what comes down on you as a result is not unmitigated or unqualified blessing. Sinners should never pray for what they deserve. That's way too risky. So in the New Testament, as you know, the word "justice" becomes "to justify." This is not something we earn but God's gift to us. We have to tiptoe around this word a little. But if we hear justice and righteousness in the sense of the

first part of the text, they mean being in tune, being aligned. We're back in the relationship God intended for us, not as a result of our own effort but as a result of God's work in us.

So if you get outside the correlation of life, what happens? You plant the vineyard, and somebody else harvests it. That's what's happening now. We're having the most beautiful fall I can remember. It's been absolutely gorgeous, seventies during the day and about forty-five at night. The vineyard keepers, the vintners, are just dancing. They've already started to crush in some vineyards, and the biggest part of it will come in two weeks, which generally coincides with the migration of the birds. So these people have planted a vineyard, and somebody else is going to enjoy it: all the starlings and robins and blue jays on the West Coast, going south in the middle to end of October and stopping by to consume a vineyard on the way. Last year a man here in Dallas figured he had twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of grapes on the vine, and he got ten thousand dollars' worth out of his harvest, because the birds ate the rest. So this is what happens: you plant the vineyard and you feed the birds.

When you're out of correlation with life, there's no necessarily good result from your efforts. You build houses of hewn stone, and somebody else lives in them. You plant your garden, and somebody else harvests it. Good luck. The correlation is broken, and you pay the consequence.

You heard my warning about this text. If you're going to preach it, be careful. If you're ticked off at the congregation, you probably shouldn't preach it, because it's real easy to let Amos carry you away. Then you can identify who the sinners are, and when you know that, you know way too much, and you're a danger to your parish.

Psalm 90: The First Commandment as Prayer

I'd better go over to the psalm. That's a lot more fun. Psalm 90:12–17 turns the First Commandment into a prayer. Is this ever fun! Saint Augustine prayed, "Give what you command, and command what you will." And Psalm 90 begins with a beautiful verse: "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." Notice there's no talk of achieving wisdom. You teach me, and then I'll know wisdom; I'll know what you're talking about.

"Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." What a beautiful prayer. We are asking God to fulfill the First Commandment in us. There is no talk here of a decision of willpower, of an achievement of justice, of deserving anything. There is simply a prayer. And that's what the First Commandment requires: that we turn to God in true faith and say,

“Give what you have promised. I expect it of you.” When God hears that, he recognizes it as true faith. We call out to him and say, “Forgive our sins. Raise me from this dead skeleton I carry around; raise me to newness of life.” And when we pray like that, he says, “I’ll be right there.” This is the promise of the First Commandment.

The psalmist, whether it’s David or whoever, knows that it doesn’t all balance out: “Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.” What a nice prayer. He knows affliction is part of the life of faith, but he knows too that God can balance things out, and that’s what he asks. You live in farming communities, or small towns, or cities that depend on them. You know what drought looks like now, and you know what adversity looks like. Take farming, where you can put the corn in and expect it to multiply a hundred and twentyfold every year; now the fields are empty. So we know adversity, we know what it looks like, and we know that everything is not under our control. So we turn to God and say, “You take care of it. We depend on you.” And he says, “You bet your life,” literally.

“Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands.” What a beautiful prayer. Holy mackerel, what more could you ask for? You can pray this prayer every day in hope and confidence, because Christ Jesus has promised to answer you, and Christ Jesus will carry you.

Hebrews 3: Unbelief Is a Power

Now we’ve got this wonderful little text from Hebrews, Hebrews 3:12–19. You remember the problem the author of Hebrews is dealing with: people falling away. So he is very concerned about the presence and power of unbelief, and he opens this little section, verse 12, with an admonition against unbelief.

We want to look at this very closely, because with the free-will nonsense so deep in our culture, unbelief is identified as a choice. You choose it. As if anybody in his right mind who hangs around the church would actually choose it! Unbelief is not a choice; it’s a power. It’s a power parallel to despair: “unbelief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.” It’s not something believers seek voluntarily, willing ourselves into unbelief. That’s nonsense. It happens this way: one thing just leads to another, one damn thing leads to another damn thing, until finally you’re four or five or six or seven steps away, and you don’t even know it. Can you imagine? Christians don’t will themselves into unbelief. Unbelief comes over us like a

fog, like a cloud at night. It comes in on soft steps and takes over, until you don't even know what has happened.

My dear old teacher Kent Knutson, whom I remember with much love, used to talk about the practical unbelief of the church, in which religion, peace and justice and all the rest of it turned into piety, takes over, and the religious set out to redeem the world, as though that were necessary after Christ's death and resurrection. Well, if that's not unbelief, you never saw it in your whole life. The world becomes our project. I always love it in John 17, when we read the magnificent prayer in which Jesus addresses the Father and prays for the unity of the church, and some bureaucrat raises his hand and says, "Yes, and now what we need is the following program I've developed, which will bring us to unity." And of course it does exactly the opposite. It shatters the church, which is pretty much what has happened. In that case unbelief masks itself under a religious purpose. And it is unbelief in the sense that we expect of ourselves what only God can do. If that's not unbelief, you don't know what is. God is unemployed, and we are leading and allowing.

So the author of Hebrews urges us to be aware. Unbelief sneaks up on us, and all of a sudden it has us. So he urges mutual watchfulness, mutual admonition: that we converse with one another as believers. And when we converse with one another as believers, the Holy Spirit is at work in our very words to encourage, comfort, and correct. That's really what's happening. When you exhort another believer, you don't do it on the conviction that the believer is going to supply the willpower; you know that's not going to work. You are appealing to the Holy Spirit to work in the other believer, and the whole exhortation rests on the assumption that the Spirit is the one who puts it to work.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." That is, today, when you hear his voice, you hear it in the expectation that he will take the field against your unbelief in his Spirit, to raise you to newness of life. This too is a dangerous text. The author of Hebrews is disappointed in those who are leaving, and he is tempted to lower the boom, and he will; we'll have to deal with that when we come to it later in the epistle. But for the time being he has it under control. The Holy Spirit has it under control, and has you under control.

So in confronting this malevolent power we stand in the company of neighbors. It is there, on the neighbor's lips, through the word your neighbor speaks, that the Holy Spirit keeps you in true faith and holds you fast in the promise of the gospel. I don't know how many times I've come out of hard funerals, hard deaths, hard situations, wondering, like Noah, whether I'm

the last one, wondering what has happened to everybody else, wondering whether God has finally burped me up and spat me out. That's the temptation we face. And every time there's been a phone call, usually from some renegade who has been a friend for a long time, saying, "I was just thinking about you." That was no accident. That's the Holy Spirit keeping us in true faith. There we go. That's a wonderful text; you can have a lot of fun with it.

Mark 10: What Must I Do?

But now we've got to go on to this Gospel. It's just fabulous. Of course they're all fabulous; picking your favorite text is a little like picking your favorite kid, or your favorite uncle. I had twenty-seven uncles and aunts, and they were all favorites. But this one is just like Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. We'll work our way through it, because it's a conversation like a good joke, where the points are made in nuances, by implication. The promise doesn't stand out here plain and simple. It's between the lines, and so we'll rely on the Holy Spirit to pull it out from between the lines and set it out plainly, so that we can preach it.

"As 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?'" At one level this is the most basic human superstition. Philip Melancthon, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, calls it the *opinio legis*: the secret conviction of the heart that because the law is correlated with life, we should be able to figure out the recipe for life, do it, and then live. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" At the first level, then, this is a superstition.

At the second level, in my experience, and certainly in Gerhard Forde's experience, as we talked about many times in our work together at Luther Seminary, this question commonly follows on the gospel. When the gospel comes home hot and heavy, when it breaks in on people as the gospel, unbelief arises. Of course: the gospel provokes unbelief, and the evidence is this question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's entirely possible that it could be asked innocently. But we already know it's a superstition, and when it comes right on the heels of the gospel, you know there's a rebellion afoot. You've hit pay dirt. And the temptation is to back off and say, "Well, here's a list of rules and regulations." What you really need to do is press the promise even further. "So you don't like that, do you? Well, tough luck. Jesus isn't going to hand you over to yourself." "What would you like to do?" as Gerhard used to say, in his quiet, lethal way. "Well, how much do you want to do?" You can just hear him.

This, of course, is the old Adam's rebellion, and what is at stake is control. The promise that Jesus saves has underneath it the implication that you don't, that I don't. So when the old Adam hears this word, he immediately gets ticked and starts asking, "Well, don't you have to do something? What do I have to do? There must be something I can do." Even diehard pagans, when they hear the gospel, will start into these questions, because they would at least like to control something. When Jesus makes the promise, he takes control. Look at what he has been doing in Mark 10, and what he is going to do by the end of Mark 10: healing the sick, raising the dead, bringing in newness of life. And there's a man watching him who says, "Well, what do I have to do?" Shut up and listen. Just sit still. It's like when Moses was leading the people out of Egypt and they were backed up against the Red Sea, with the armies of Pharaoh bearing down on them, and the people said, "What are we to do?" And Moses said, "Just stand there; God will take care of it." And that's what he did. He opened the way across the Red Sea, and Christ Jesus, of course, opens the way of salvation. So at the second level this is a rebellious question, an attempt to wrest control from Jesus.

At the third level, we could say the rebellion is masked in a kind of earnestness. There's a piety here that is quite intense. This is a question asked by a disciplined religious person who is pretty sure Jesus expects some performance, and he wants to know how much. That's not innocent either. When my mother handed out commandments to us on Saturday mornings, I was the negotiator. I always said, "How much do you want me to do? When am I finished?" And of course the whole attempt, back at the second level, was to control the obligations coming down on me. But it is possible that this comes from a religious person who is really pressed. We know that at the end of the story he is shattered, but right now he is pressed, and he is asking.

Why Do You Call Me Good?

So Jesus engages him in conversation. Jesus is obviously having some kind of nasty fun with him here, drawing him in and taking him on. So listen to them play. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good?'"

Why do you suppose Jesus asks that question? He asks it because he has been good, real good: not in the moral sense, but in the sense that he has been giving himself away over and over again. And all of a sudden he meets a man who wants to make eternal life his project, to make himself his project. So, given Jesus' gifts and the man's question, it's natural for Jesus to

answer, “What do you mean, good? What are you talking about? I’ve been giving myself away, and that’s obviously not satisfactory to you. Why in the world do you think I’m good?”

“No one is good but God alone.” And of course, by implication, that is Jesus’ promise. He is God in the flesh, and since no one is good but God alone, he alone is good. He is the only one in the whole history of the human race who actually did what he said and bestowed what he promised. So he is good, and he hangs the man up on the question: What do you mean by that? Why am I good?

And then he proceeds to answer. This is kind of fun. He’s not playing dirty pool, but he has the man by the short hairs and is pushing him up against the wall. “You know the commandments.” And now he goes through the second table, the commandments that concern our relationship with our neighbor. He takes the Fourth out of order, but otherwise he proceeds according to the traditional numbering. “You shall not murder”: there’s the Fifth. “You shall not commit adultery”: the Sixth. “You shall not steal”: the Seventh. “You shall not bear false witness”: the Eighth. “You shall not defraud”: that’s an interesting interpretation of the commandment against coveting. There are a couple of different interpretations, and Jesus takes the one that reads coveting as using false or dishonest means to get what belongs to the neighbor. “Honor your father and mother”: the Fourth Commandment comes at the end rather than at the beginning.

Why is that? Because, of course, that’s the tough one. The reason the Fourth Commandment comes at the beginning of the second table is that it is the port of entry into our relationships with our neighbor, and that’s where we have the greatest difficulty. Jesus has put it at the end for a reason. He’s after this man. He’s putting the squeeze on him, hoping the man is honest enough to know that this is likely to have been a very troubled relationship.

Now listen to this man. This is really fun. “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” At one level he is absolutely right. The thing about the second table of the commandments is that we can actually do pretty well with it, at a superficial level anyway. We can actually achieve the commandments. So it’s not that this man is telling a lie. If you apply yourself, if you’re conscientious and careful, you can do fairly well. You start with the Fifth, then the Sixth, the Seventh, the Eighth, and even the Ninth and Tenth. If you don’t put yourself under too much scrutiny, if you’re not watched too closely, you can do pretty well here, no question about it. You can be an honest citizen.

But listen to him: “I have kept all these.” Who has kept them? I have. He is his own project. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “All these I have kept.” The old Adam is the source of religion, no doubt about it. And when the old Adam gets religion, he goes in drag. He dresses up like a bunch of drag queens at a Halloween parade, strutting along showing his stuff, singing and whistling and being whistled at for all his religious achievements. “All these I have kept.”

Of course Jesus knows exactly whom he’s dealing with. I always think this man has been Jaycees Man of the Year. He belongs to all the service clubs in town. He has been recognized as one of the up-and-coming young men of the whole state. And now, having achieved all this, he wants to add eternal life to his shelf of awards. This man is self-possessed. He is us: a sinner who figures he can make himself a project and, having done so, can achieve all that is required of him.

Jesus, Looking at Him, Loved Him

“Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Now here’s what’s fun: Jesus is looking at him. Can you imagine being looked at by Jesus, being examined by him that way? I’d wither. Holy smokes. “Jesus, looking at him.”

I remember one time when Forde and I were teaching together, a Baptist student showed up in class. Gerhard was giving a great lecture on the theology of the cross, and this student raised his hand and said, “Well, what happens if you don’t suffer?” Apparently that’s hypothetically possible for some people. I can’t imagine it, and neither could Gerhard. He gave him that baleful look that was just awful, and then he said, “Well, feel your pulse. Are you still breathing?”

“Jesus, looking at him.” And when Jesus looked at him, of course, he saw right through him. He knew that man’s heart had him in the basket. Golly. This is the religious overachiever who feels sorry for the rest of us because we don’t have the same system of credits. And so Jesus looks at him, and he wants to deliver him from his religion. He likes him. “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” He feels good about him. He wants to affirm him. And what an affirmation, holy Toledo: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.”

You lack just one thing. Now he has the man’s heart in his hands, and he is squeezing. Now he is delivering this man from himself. Now he is striking him dead, and he is doing it with the First Commandment. “Sell what you own.” Let go of the whole investment. Suddenly he

has gone from the second table to the first, and in moving into the first table he administers what old Sheldon Tostengard used to call the *coup de grâce*. This is literally the stroke of grace, where grace is death before it is resurrection.

“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.” There you go. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. I am not your achievement. I am the one who loves you, and I give myself to you under no condition.”

And so, all of a sudden, the man who thought himself completely in control, in charge, leading Jesus into a nice discussion of what he ought to do, complete with hypothetical possibilities, complete with goals for the achievement of justice and righteousness, complete with political affiliations that will promote justice and righteousness and leave those nasty right-wingers behind; a nice conversation where there are outsiders and insiders, and I’m the insider, and I have achieved, I have done, just give me a little advice on what more I should do: all of a sudden he is taken from that into a new position, where he is not the achiever but the receiver, not the self-transcender but the blessed.

“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” He would rather have his possessions than Jesus. Golly, what a choice; that’s no choice at all. That’s just death on horseback, unbelief taking you over and destroying you. And so what’s good about this? What’s good about it is that Jesus is telling you this story to liberate you.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0hxXY2hyus>

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