

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I want to take as a text the last sentence from that reading from Hebrews which we heard, which says this. "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." The key phrase I'd draw out from that sentence is finding grace, and I want to read this story of the rich man who comes to Jesus as a story of a man who sadly fails to find grace. From what we know of the man who comes to Jesus, he would appear to be a good and earnest man. He had lived a moral and upright life, striving to live by the 10 commandments. Jesus recognizes the good in him, and we're told Jesus loved him. There's something a bit uncomfortable about the encounter. Jesus and this man, they're just not on the same wavelength, and the problem starts with the opening question, and then it kind of goes downhill from there. It ends with the man just walking away, grieving, but the man's opening gambit is this.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Turns out not to be a good question to get the conversation going. It's a question which seems to imply that eternal life comes as a prize for good behavior. The man sees eternal life as a reward, as if God's favor and His grace need to be earned. When I was at high school, there was a class smarty pants called Alastair. I'm sure you have all, could all name the equivalent in your class, but this Alastair, he used to ... None of us liked him. He used to wind us all up, because at the start of the year, he'd go to the class teacher and say, find out what we were doing in the year, and what they'd be giving prizes for, and what whoever won the prize would need to have done. Sure enough at the end of the year, Alastair would always win the class prize, and there's something of that attitude going on with the man here who comes to Jesus. He thinks he can earn salvation. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

He wants to open up a sort of credit line with God. He wants to be assured that God will log all his

good works that he does, and then put a gold star by the end, by his name. We don't know his name. Probably Alastair, but the New Testament's very clear. It doesn't work like that. We're not in a credit system with God. We don't have to earn our salvation, although I know many people, many of us, maybe, would like it if it was as this man who comes to Jesus would like it to be, that we kind of ... Everybody gets what they deserve. Isn't that fair, that the good get rewarded, the bad get punished? It's not like that. Salvation comes as a gift.

My first church in north London, it was at the end of a long avenue of enormous chestnut trees, and I remember going to church one day at this time of year, in the fall, and it was full of big chestnuts that we in England call conkers. They fell onto the ground, and the ground was full of these great big nuts that we like to play a game with.

There was lots of kids around, and they were still throwing sticks, and things, anything, shoes, anything up into the tree to try and knock down some more chestnuts. It was almost as if, if they got them off the tree off a high branch, they must be bigger, and better, and sweeter than the ones that were lying on the ground. Actually, all they had to do to get a big, sweet nut was just to pick it off the ground, but somehow they'd rather knock them out of the tree themselves, and there's something in there about salvation. Rather than simply accept, pick up the gift that God offers to us, we'd rather be told we had to do something, and we get on and do it, and earn it. It's not like that. Saint Paul says this: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." Salvation comes as a gift from God. It's not a reward. We can't earn it. We don't strive to earn God's favor on merit.

We simply need to pray and ask, and receive that gift of grace which God offers. Salvation comes to us not as a result of our goodness or our good deeds, but God's love, and grace, and what He has done for us in Christ Jesus. He does, we receive.

The short answer to the man's question, what must I do to inherit eternal life, is rather short and shocking: nothing. There's nothing we can do to earn God's favor, to inherit eternal life. God does, we receive. It's shocking because we'd rather be in control of our own destiny. That's certainly I think what the man was hoping for. He wanted to be told what he had to do so he could go along and do it. That's why the disciples say in the story, "Who then can be saved," because they've seen this very respectable, religious man come to Jesus, and go away sad and empty-handed, without finding what he was looking for. The disciples are thinking, hang on. If this man's not finding grace, then who is?

Jesus replied, "For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God. For God, all things are possible." We don't, we can't, save ourselves. It is God who saves us. It's out of our control. We have to depend on the God who gives, and I think it's this part of the message of grace which was hindering the man who comes to Jesus. We're not told much about him, other than that he was wealthy. It says he had many possessions. Money brings many things, and one of them is the belief that we're in control. This is as true now as it was in the time of Jesus. The man who came to Jesus could control where he lived, where his kids went to school, what kind of work he wanted to be doing. He'd come to depend on his wealth. His security lay in his bank account, and there's an element in this encounter with Jesus of wanting to be in control. What must I do to have eternal life, as if he could control not just his worldly life, but his spiritual life, the life to come.

When Jesus challenged him to give away his money, he wasn't attacking money itself, I think, rather than the self-sufficiency, and the control, the sense of control that money can bring. Jesus is challenging the man to give up his security, or where he puts his sense of security. He's saying, "Give that up. Come follow Me. Learn to rely on Me, and not your wealth," He's saying. Jesus didn't call all His followers to give up material things. We're told in the gospel He relied on the benevolence of some of His wealthy followers, but He did call them all to follow Him, and to trust Him.

He wanted His followers to find their security in God, not in their possessions or in their achievements. Before I close, I want to draw two contrasts that are going on around this passage. The first is the contrast between this capable, rich man who comes to Jesus, and the child that features in the verses immediately preceding this story, that we heard the other week. Just before this story, Jesus is talking with His disciples, and He takes a young child, and He says this. "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." So that when Jesus says at the end of the passage that the first will be last, and the last first, I think He's drawing a comparison between this upright, well-respected religious figure, and the humble, dependent child. In the kingdom of God, prominence is not given to those to who might expect it. The rich and the powerful are not at the front of the line.

The second contrast is between the theme of grace that I've been talking about, and the cost that's involved in following Jesus. As Peter said, "we've left everything, and followed You." The wondrous free gift of grace can cost us everything. Who knows what will happen once we accept God's free gift of grace, and begin our journey of following Jesus Christ?

The famous German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who Rebecca quoted the other week, wrote a great book which I'd recommend to everybody called *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he wrote about the danger of preaching grace, the kind of message I've been speaking about, the free gift of God's grace, without at the same time, talking about the demands of discipleship. He warned of preaching what he called cheap grace, which is grace without discipleship, and the cost that's involved in following Jesus.

The balance that we need to maintain actually is there in the collect that we heard at the beginning of the service. We ask God that His grace may always precede, precede us, that we may continually be given to good works. Note the way around it is, grace precedes our practice of the

good works that come from following Jesus. Grace is an inspiration for us to follow Jesus more closely, and the balance that we seek to maintain is clear in the passage. The rich man sadly missed out on the free gift of grace, and St. Peter spoke of the costs of discipleship. There's the balance in the passage.

I started by naming the story, the story of a man who didn't find grace, and I'll close with a story about someone who did find what they were looking for. It's a rather enigmatic story about a cyclist who trained very hard for a race. He was a very good cyclist, and he was on the start of the starting line for the race, and he just had this sense that a blessing was going to come to him in the race, but he didn't know how. Anyway, he sets off with the pack. By the start of the second hill, mountain, he thought he was flying. He was so easy. He got into the lead. He was cycling on his own, and he came down the mountain, and hit some wetlands all on his own, far out in the lead in this race, and then all of a sudden, a great, big heron took up from just in front of him, flew over right over his head, and cast him into a shadow under its wing. He got off, straddled his bike, and as the shadow covered him, he seemed to be ... Something seemed to open in him that he'd been chasing, that he couldn't name. All the other cyclists flew past him, and in years to come, people would say to him, "What cost you the race?" He'd always say, "I didn't lose the race. I left it."

May those of us who seek grace find it.

Amen.