

“Words Do Matter”

Mark 10:17-22

Words really do matter. Words are powerful. Words are specific in their description of people, places, events, ideas. Words can be beautiful and uplifting. Words can also be poorly chosen. The old saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is not really accurate. There is another saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” Words really do matter, and words are powerful – and this is exponentially true when we speak of God and His Word.

But as it happens all too often, we hear in Mark’s Gospel of a rich young man who chooses his words poorly. He says, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” His statement is so revealing about what he truly believes. He kneels down before Jesus and asks this question, which is why Jesus responds, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” This exchange between Jesus and the rich young man is primarily not about works righteousness and it is not about the love of money. This is about Jesus being recognized as true God.

He gave the young man ample opportunity to confess his faith. This young man had every opportunity to say, as Peter has already confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus is three years into His ministry. He has revealed Himself through the miracles, through His Word, and always pointing to what Moses and the prophets had said concerning Him – concerning the Messiah.

Jesus says, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.” He gave this young man a perfect opening to confess the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Yet, no confession is made. God was not recognized.

There is a frightening movement within our culture to, at least question, if not outright reject the fullness of God. There is a new classification of religious activity. It is popular to declare yourself to be “spiritual but not religious.” Some go so far as to say, and it is a catchy phrase (good for bumper stickers and YouTube video tag lines), “I love Jesus but hate the church.” There is a semi-viral YouTube video entitled “Why I hate religion, but love Jesus.”

As I said before, words do matter. You cannot say you love Jesus, yet hate the church He established. And the argument is made, “What about all the abuses, the pedophiles, and all the other problems within the church? How does that show Christ?”

As Lutherans, the answer is simple. Martin Luther spent his entire ministry fighting against the abuses and false teachings of the church. He went so far as to say that the Pope was acting in the spirit of antichrist. But the true confessions of faith, the Word of God, the flesh and blood of Christ, the Word joined with the water, the essence and marks of the church should not go away. They must not go away.

Satan wants you to separate Christ from His bride the church. And by “church”, I am not talking about institutions or denominations. The “Church” is the people of God gathered around God’s Word and Sacraments. We are the body of Christ with Christ as our Head. Satan wants you to view Jesus as some spiritual essence out there that you come

to know through experiences in your life. The enemies of Christ and His church do not want you to see the eternal Son of God as the man who was setting out on His journey to Jerusalem – as we hear in Mark’s Gospel.

The eternal Son of God took on human flesh. John writes in his Gospel, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Son of God became human and placed Himself between you and the wrath of judgment – the wrath of the law. He suffered humiliation, endured cruelty, and is nailed to a cross to take away the guilt of your sin. Where this is taught, there is the church.

This is why, when I hear someone say they love God but have no use for the church, I press the point of a doctrinal confession – which they universally say does not matter. “Deeds, not creeds” – another catchy phrase which ignores the truth that words do matter. And the funny thing about the phrase “Deeds, not creeds” is that the very phrase itself is a creed.

The rich young man was sort of a “deeds, not creeds” kind of guy. I am sure everyone, including himself, thought that he was an outstanding young man. He was the best that he could be. However, in the Kingdom of God, the law cannot save, even when everyone tells you that you are the best. Good deeds are what God’s children do as simple and very incomplete thank offerings for the real work that Christ did on the cross.

This truth must be confessed. It is what separates Christians (the children of God) from everyone else. There are only two religions in the world – the religion of the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ; and the religion of the Law, the vain attempt to find salvation by any other way.

I know that in the past I have mentioned Arius, the bishop against whom the Nicene Creed was written. Arius said, “Jesus is not of one substance of the Father. He is of a similar substance.” In the Greek, to make this change, you only have to change one letter of one word. Homoiousius instead of homoousius. You just add an iota, the smallest letter in the language.

And that was precisely the argument that Arius made. He said, “Gentlemen, we are fighting over one little letter.” That one little letter was the difference between being a Christian and not being a Christian. Words do matter.

Historically, the line of demarcation separating those who are within the Christian Church and those outside of Christ is the confession of faith – namely the Nicene Creed. There is a reason we confess this each week. Words really do matter.

The words matter so much because of what they say about God. Our Father, the Creator of all that is visible and invisible loved you so much that He sent His Son to suffer your judgment and to open the path to salvation.

When the rich young man asks, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He is belittling God; he is belittling God’s Word; and he is belittling God’s love for each of you. When the “deeds, not creeds” crowd say, “I love Jesus but hate the church,” they also are belittling God, and His Word, and His love for each of you. Words do matter, because without words there is no truth. And Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, is the Word made flesh who made His dwelling among us, and who set out on a journey to Jerusalem because He is the way and the truth and the life. Amen.