

## Sermon for October 10, 2021

### Shivon Miller

How many of you keep a “to-do” list? Maybe you are someone who keeps multiple “to-do” lists, one list for every project or area of life – a home list, a work list, a kid list? I tend to be a person who starts by making “to-do” lists in my head, recycling and ruminating over what needs to be done, until the list becomes too long to remember and it must spill its way out onto paper. Then instead of spending time trying to remember what’s on the “to-do” list, I spend time searching for where I have put the “to-do” list.

In today’s gospel reading we encounter a man who has spent his life forming and keeping a very intentional “to-do” list. He has made a list of things “to-do” to inherit eternal life. He has organized his life around this list. One can almost feel this man’s anxiety. Are the right things on the list? Has he done them all? How can he know for certain that the work has been accomplished and his eternal life secured? What if he has missed something? He longs to experience the certainty and relief that comes with checking off the last item that needs to be done. He wants to rest assured that his eternal life is secure.

Hearing about Jesus, this man comes to have his list and its accuracy affirmed. He knows Jesus as a teacher of God’s law. Envision him standing before Jesus, holding his check list, believing he has put all the right things on the list and checked off all the right boxes. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Imagine the man making check marks as Jesus responds “You know the commandments: you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, defraud. You should honor father and mother.” Jesus ends and the man looks at his list and smiles “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” But Jesus continues “You lack one thing; go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor.” Oh no! The list was not complete. The man is overwhelmed. He can never accomplish it all. He has many possessions. He goes away grieving, uncertain of attaining eternal life.

But the man was so focused on checking off things on his “to-do” list, so focused on what he might do to secure his own life, that he has missed Jesus’ words scattered throughout the conversation. What has Jesus said between the list of commands and the one more thing for the list?

Jesus’ first words to the man are “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” No one is good but God alone. This man has spent his life trying to be good, to be good enough to secure eternal life. Jesus right away seems to frame the conversation “No one is good but God alone.” Eternal life will not be secured through an individual’s goodness.

But Jesus goes on to list the commandments as the man anticipates: you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, defraud. You shall honor parents. And here for a second time I wonder if the man has really heard Jesus. He responds “I have kept all these.” Really?

I will never forget beginning confirmation and learning the fullness of the meaning behind these commandments. I remember hearing the commandments at that age and responding like this man thinking – “I’m good.” I haven’t killed anybody. I haven’t even married anyone yet so I couldn’t have committed adultery, no shoplifting or bank robberies on my record, never been a witness in a trial to lie about a neighbor and I did alright at listening to my mother.

I was horrified to learn that all the commandments expanded to include not only a wide understanding of “things done” but also to include things “left undone.” Suddenly “Do not murder” didn’t simply mean you hadn’t stab your neighbor till he quit breathing, it meant not hurting anyone physically or emotionally. It meant not murdering by the act of omission as people in the world hunger while we enjoy abundance. Don’t commit adultery wasn’t just for married people, it meant all our words and conduct in matters of sex and relationships were pure. “Do not steal” meant not taking anything from another and expanded to mean we should help all others protect and improve what is theirs. And “Do not bear false witness” meant not gossiping and actively seeking ways to speak kindly of all others, stepping in and defending others whenever possible. Suddenly there wasn’t a commandment I hadn’t broken.

“Teacher, I have kept all these things since my youth.” Our scripture text reads “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...” Can’t you just see it? The man standing triumphantly with his list and Jesus looking at him. Jesus sees and knows the man. He, even more than the man himself, knows if the man has really kept all those commandments. Jesus knows his deep longing to prove he has been good, to prove he has earned eternal life from God. And the text says “and Jesus loved him.”

Then Jesus appears to give the man one more thing for his list. “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.” The man hears only the “to-do” and adds it to his list, walking away knowing he will fail at accomplishing this. For the man has found security in all that he has earned. He can’t give it all away. He clings to what he has earned in possessions. He clings to what he has done to earn his own eternal life.

But what if Jesus wasn’t trying to add to the “to-do” list but rather was throwing the “to-do” list away throughout this whole conversation? It is not ours “to-do” – it is God’s work. Jesus is really urging the man to let go of all that he has tried to earn on his own and simply follow Jesus. Throw out the list – only God is good, I see you and you are known and loved regardless of your ability to follow the commands, you do not earn your own eternal life, simply follow Jesus in whom eternal life is secured.

Jesus looks at the crowd and says “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” What? The people are so confused. “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Throw out your “to-do” list. Stop trying to earn and prove your worth. Your eternal life is secured in God alone. Your life is found in God alone.

Imagine standing before Jesus today. What do you keep trying to put on your “to-do” list to earn God’s love, to secure the worth of your life? See Jesus look at you, truly know you, and love you. Hear him say “You lack but one thing; go give away everything that you think is earning your worth and salvation, and simply follow me. For I have checked all the boxes. I have completed the list on the cross. You can let go of your anxiety and know with all certainty that you have eternal life, life in me now and forever.” May you ruminate on that for that is something that can never be lost.