

Homily for October 15, 2006
28th Sunday of the Year (B)

By Father Charles Bowes

Wisdom 7:7-11
Psalm 90:12-13, 14-15, 16-17
Hebrews 4:12-13
Mark 10:17-30

It costs everything to follow God's Spirit.

“What must I do...to be a success in religion, in life for all eternity?” asks the young fellow in Mark chapter 10. Just like the rich young man in today's Gospel, we often come to Jesus armed with our resumes and our lists and our calendars of events.

Here are my credentials, Lord. What do you think about me so far? What must I do, Lord, to inherit eternal life? How many temptations should I avoid? How many committees must I chair? How big a banner should I sew? How many laws do I obey? How much money should I give away?

How many cookies are enough? Sometimes it seems as if, despite our best intentions, our very business becomes a barrier to the relationship we seek. I can't just drop everything and follow Jesus! Who would take on all my commitments? Do you think that parish festival is going to organize itself? Look kids, I know I haven't been home in a week, but the Christmas Pageant isn't going well. Those kindergarten angels are no angels, believe me.

That's not to say that obeying God's laws and serving our communities is trivial or unimportant. The poor must be fed, the parish bills must be paid, and those kindergarten angels really do need help. The danger comes when we mistake our response to faith for faith itself. The danger comes when we substitute a close relationship with money, with activities, with laws and committees – for a close relationship with the

Lord. The danger comes when we begin to believe that salvation can be earned if we just follow the rules and keep ourselves busy. Is it guilt that drives us so to doubt our worthiness? Is it some childhood twist of fate that makes us question us? Is it something in our American culture? In the water we drink? In the shows and plays we enjoy that prompt us to feel we must earn our place with God? As I said to my psychiatrist decades ago when wrestling with depression: “Doctor, just tell me what to do and I'll do it.” “That's the problem, young man...that's precisely the problem,” he said. Lord, what must I do to gain eternal life?

This encounter between Jesus and the rich young man reminds us that nothing, not even scrupulous obedience to the law, can earn us a place near the Lord. That place comes only as a gift. The human way of giving to God is to receive – and to be able to receive means to be open, receptive, listening, wasting time with the Lord. As the great Jewish mystic, Simone Weil, observed, “Prayer is attention.”

“I don't really want your resume,” Jesus said to the rich young man – and to us, if we can stop running long enough to listen. “I don't really want your resume. I really just want you.”

Was the rich young man in the story sad because he had to leave so much behind? Or was it because he was giving up on Jesus?

Let us pray. Lord, how did you come to know that you did not have to earn your Father's love?

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follow God's Spirit.*