

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, January 29, 2017**

COME AND DIE

Mark 10:17-27

The great German pastor, theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer once described the Christian life this way. He wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*: “When Christ calls a man He bids him come and die.” Die literally? Sometimes so. Bonhoeffer himself suffered that fate, shot by Nazis ten days before the arrival of allied troops to liberate the Flossenburg prison in which he was being held. More often, however, the call to die is a call to die to self, selfishness, to everything that stands in the way of our giving our entire lives and our entire selves over to the loving will of Jesus Christ.

Nowhere in Scripture is the truth of Bonhoeffer’s statement better demonstrated than the story of a conversation between Jesus and a rich young man. The story begins with a conversation between Jesus and a young man who is described in Luke’s Gospel as a ruler. We don’t know exactly what that means but we know that he was Jewish, and so as a ruler it may be that he was a leader among Jews and perhaps one of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council that led Judaism. It may be that he had a secular leadership role. We don’t actually know, but we do know that this leader of the Jews was troubled. He asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now he may have been seeking an opinion in the same way someone goes from one doctor to another and ask them, “What’s really wrong with me?” Or it might be that he was just collecting opinions about an interesting theological subject the way that we might consult one commentary or another or listen to one preacher or another talk about the same passage. Probably, however, it is the case that for him this was no academic question. This was an existential issue for him.

When he wanted to know how to inherit eternal life he didn’t want to know that in the abstract. He wanted to know for himself. He wanted to know what *he* needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. And there was probably some urgency about it because, according to Mark, in verse 17, he ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before Him. Running up to Him suggests that this was an issue of moment to him, that for whatever reason – perhaps he’d heard Jesus preach before; perhaps he’d heard of Him – but one way or another he knew that this was a Man who could answer his question and that he needed, maybe desperately, to get to Him. And he fell on his knees, which suggests again that it wasn’t an academic question but rather one that he took very personally. And in falling down at Jesus’ knees he was recognizing that this Person, this Rabbi may actually be the One who could give him the answer that he sought.

Well, Jesus asks him an interesting question in response to his question. First, He says, “Why do you call me good?” Which is another way of saying, “You don’t really know necessarily who you’re talking to.” “No one is good except God alone.” Of course, He was God incarnate, but the rich young man didn’t see that, for sure. He goes on, He doesn’t press him on that point. He just simply puts him on notice that he was not

necessarily talking to just any rabbi here, to someone who's just going to give you a pat answer or refer you to the same kind of answers that any other rabbi or any other teacher would give. But he says in verse 19, "You know the commandments." And of course the young man did. Anyone who was a leader of Jews would have known the commandments. Specifically He mentions, interestingly enough, not the first table of the Ten Commandments. He doesn't mention have no other gods before me or don't take the name of the Lord in vain. Instead He asks him about the second table: Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony. Do not defraud, which is a species of lying. Honor your father and mother. So He gives him commandments five through nine. And He simply leaves that up there. You know the commandments, right? And He gives the young man an opportunity. "What do you have to say about those?" And the young man says something that I expect many of wouldn't have said in his place. Verse 20: "Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy." My suspicion is that most, if not everyone here would look at that second table of the Ten Commandments and say, "Well, I've given it a try. I haven't murdered anyone. I've been tempted on occasion. I haven't committed adultery, though I have looked at women the way I shouldn't. I haven't stolen. I did fudge on my taxes a couple of times. We're not even going to talk about giving false testimony. Honoring my father and my mother? Listen, if you knew my mother you would know what I think of that commandment. I know if I had been in the young man's place I'd have had a very difficult time saying what he said. Even before I was a Christian I did know, believe it or not, the Ten Commandments. I couldn't have run them off if someone had asked me but I knew generally what they said. And even before becoming a Christian I would have had a great deal of difficulty saying, "All of these I have kept since I was a boy." Nevertheless, when Jesus hears that He doesn't say, "Boy, you seem to have skipped right over the ninth commandment because that one says, 'Do not give false testimony,' and you just did." He doesn't say that. His response is to take what the young man says at face value. Verse 21 says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him."

It's not that Jesus didn't see sin in him. Of course He did. And it's not that He thought that necessarily the young man's opinion of himself was entirely accurate. None of our opinions about ourselves are entirely accurate. But when He looked at this young man and He saw one who was asking eternal questions and who was ascribing to himself at the very minimum a sturdy willingness to keep the law of God. Jesus saw in this young man, I think, a great zeal for God and He saw in him discipleship potential. Who knows? Maybe He even thought to Himself, "If anything happens to any of the twelve we've got somebody who can fill in." Later on after Judas Iscariot committed suicide, the eleven remaining Apostles cast lots in order to fill his place. So there were meant to be twelve at that point. And who knows? Maybe, rather than the otherwise unknown Matthias it might have been this young man who would have stepped up and taken Judas' place. Jesus, I think, saw that potential. But at the same time He also knew that the depth of his commitment would have to be tested,

If you go up to the average person on the street and ask, "Would you like to live forever?" I dare say most people would say it sounds like a pretty good deal, depending on the circumstances of course. So when this man asks, "What must I do to inherit

eternal life?” he’s not asking a unique question. He’s asking a question that anyone might ask. And if it’s a question of getting an answer to that question, Jesus is going to give it to him. Jesus looks at him and proceeds to give him the one answer that he really didn’t want: “Go, sell everything you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow Me.”

I don’t know about you, but if I had been told that I probably would have responded the same way the young man did. Verse 22 tells us, “At this the man’s face fell and he went away sad because he had great wealth.” And what might have been added to that is, not only did he have great wealth, but he was attached to it. He had asked about eternal life and Jesus told him what he needed to do. And if eternal life was that important to him he would have said, “All right, now I know. I’ll go into town. I’ll get rid of everything. I’ll give away the proceeds. And then I will do what Jesus has told me to do and I will follow Him.” But he doesn’t do that. And he doesn’t do that because, as the title of Bonhoeffer’s book says, he was being asked to pay the cost of discipleship and it was a price that he was unwilling to pay.

Now it’s important, as a matter of fact it’s critical, that we not misinterpret this command. There are some people who take this as literally binding on all Christians. There are those who have attacked the church for two millennia because they have read this story and what they have heard was that all Christians need to give away everything that they have to the poor and then they can be Jesus’ disciples. And the church has never taught that. There are those over the centuries who have heard that command and understood it to be specifically for them. The name that comes immediately to mind is Francis of Assisi who heard this in church one Sunday and went and did exactly what the rich young man was told to do because he saw himself in the place of the rich young man. Francis in fact was a rich young man. So he heard that as being for himself. But the fact is that the New Testament itself, the Gospels themselves, make quite clear that the idea that one must sell everything that one owns and live like a pauper or beggar in order to follow Jesus is not in fact what He’s saying. Peter and Andrew, for instance, kept their fishing gear after they joined Jesus. The tools of their trade. The thing from which they made their living. Their wealth. Not nearly, I suspect, as much as the young man’s but nevertheless their hard assets. We know that they kept them because later on in the story they used them, even after Jesus’ resurrection. There’s also Jesus’ approval of Mary’s use of an expensive oil to anoint Him. You’ll remember that the disciples when they saw that happening were themselves appalled and said this oil could be sold and the proceeds given to the poor. And they might have added, “Just like You told the rich young ruler.” And Jesus’ response was, “Don’t give her a hard time. What she’s doing she does out of love.” And of course she had come by the oil in some way or another to begin with.

So what Jesus is doing in this passage is not condemning possession per se. What He is doing is calling upon the rich young man to die. Not to sell, but to die. To die to whatever keeps him from answering the call to discipleship. Bonhoeffer put it this way: “Discipleship is the end. Voluntary poverty [in the case of this young man] is the means by which that discipleship may be achieved.” Discipleship is the end. Voluntary poverty

is the means. So the means are going to differ from person to person, depending upon what the barrier to discipleship is.

For each of us the means is going to be different. In the same way that for instance if an American, a Frenchman and an English woman all wanted to get to Paris we couldn't all do it in the same way. The English woman would take the Channel tunnel. The Frenchman would go by car. We have to take a plane. But our goal, our end, is all the same.

Now the means being different for each of us is a recognition that for each of us the barrier to discipleship differs. Even when they are of the same species they differ from person to person. Those barriers express themselves differently. They take different forms. For the rich young man, obviously, and it's still the case today, the problem was wealth. His wealth was more important to him than eternal life and so he left with Jesus looking at him as he departed.

How do you know when wealth or possessions are the barrier to your discipleship? I'd suggest when you turn down an opportunity to serve people in need because doing so might put a crimp in your standard of living, even if only temporarily. If we're not willing to sacrifice our standard of living, or if we're not even willing to sacrifice any of our possessions for the sake of others, then those possessions are a problem. Because our discipleship is for others. It's for God. It's for our neighbor. And if we're unwilling to serve the neighbor we're unwilling to serve God. And if we do not do either of those then we are not Jesus' disciples. We are, instead, like the rich young man who walked away distressed.

For some people, and this seems to be particularly the case in America right now, it's politics. Their political beliefs or their partisan preferences. For some people now they would rather cut down a political opponent than turn the other cheek. And the idea of actually compromising with someone who believes something different fills them with horror. We don't compromise, even if it's not a matter of principle, because you don't compromise with the enemy. As soon as we start seeing people as enemies, whether they're Democrats, Republicans, liberals or conservatives, then we've abandoned discipleship. Because at that point we've something earthly – and I'm not denying that it's important – before our obligations to others. We're called upon to love our neighbors and to do so not just when they are of the same political party or when they happen to hold the same views of public policy. We're called upon to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Just for one example of the way this manifests itself, on that marvelous source of all truth and goodness, namely the Internet, have you ever said, have you ever written anything that you would not say to a person face to face? If you have, join the club. I know I have. It is so tempting to just wipe out that stupid person who just made that idiotic comment. It's so easy to do that. Especially because you're never going to see them live and in person. They probably don't even know your real name because you're using a screen name. "The Christian avenger!" Wouldn't that be a great Internet screen name?

It would certainly describe the way a lot of people act on the Internet, except the Christian part. The way I've acted on occasion. If you would take that kind of attitude toward people that you would never take live and in person you have to ask yourself, "Am I failing to be the person who loves neighbor as I love myself even when I don't see the neighbor?" Please note, when Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself He didn't say only the person standing right in front of you, which is why hopefully our perspective is a bit larger than just the people who happen to live in our actual neighborhood, but rather beyond that.

For some people it could be their prejudices, and those prejudices could be any one of a thousand things. Peter hesitated to go to the Gentiles with the gospel before he was convinced by God in a vision that he was supposed to do so. "Oh no, Lord. I've never eaten anything unclean. I'm not going to do that." And God had to show him a specific vision in order to get him to do that. For some people it's fear of embarrassment or rejection. Some would rather die than risk that. Moses conversation with God in Exodus chapter 3 is a model for such people. Moses gives God one excuse after another why he can't do what God has told him to do. And it all amounts to, "Not me, God! I can't deal with it." Ask yourself this: Do you start to sweat when the subject of religion comes up? Do you look around to note where the closest door is out of which you can flee at a moment's notice? Or do you ever shy away from doing something in the life of the church that would put you in a position of being a representative of the church with people you don't know? It's the people you don't know who are really the problematic ones because you don't have any idea how the people you don't know are going to respond to you. They're the ones who scare you. You know, I know that I can say pretty much any dumb thing that comes to mind in front of you. I no doubt have. And you'll love me anyway because we're brothers and sisters in Christ. If I go over to the Kingstowne shopping center and I start blurting out anything that comes to mind I'm going to have people calling the police asking how this guy escaped from the mental ward of the hospital. Actually now that I think about it some of you may have asked that question yourselves. Well, anyway, the point is that there are as many barriers to discipleship as there are people. And that which prevents us from heeding Christ's call to the rich young ruler, which is in fact the same call that goes to us to follow Him, whatever it is that prevents us from doing that is what we're to sell or remove from our lives.

How do we do that? Well, the second part of this passage, verses 23-27 offer us a picture of how the power of God comes in. Jesus offers the story of the camel and the eye of the needle. We don't need to get into details regarding that. But the disciples heard Him saying that no one with material means can ever get into the kingdom of God. Who, then, can be saved, we're asked in verse 27. Jesus has just gotten through saying how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. I don't know if the disciples really got what He was getting at when He said that, but my suspicion is that the young man, at least in part, did. When He says how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, He's not referring to material possessions necessarily. He's referring to whatever it is that is important to you that you hold to be of value more than God and more than following. And so Jesus looks at them in verse 27, they've asked the question, "Who

then can be saved?” and He made clear, “On your own, no one. With man this is impossible.” Whatever your barrier to discipleship is – and you know what the answer to that question is as I do about mine – that is the way in which you are rich. By yourself there is nothing you can do to get rid of it. You can try. You can make an effort. But in the end you’re going to hold onto it with every ounce of strength you’ve got. You know why? Because it’s that important to you. Why would you just let go something that was of such importance to you? You wouldn’t. You can’t do it. “With man this is impossible,” He says, “but not with God.” With God all things are possible.

I’ve got a couple of minutes, so here’s a short story. In 1986 I was serving in the United Methodist Church in Pittsboro, NC, and I had a friend who was in Fascin, which oddly enough was the place that I went to when I left Pittsboro. Well my friend called me one day in the evening about nine o’clock and said that a member of his congregation had been in an accident. He was in a tobacco barn and whatever it was that was curing the tobacco blew up and the man had third degree burns over 70 percent of his body. He was taken by helicopter to Chapel Hill, right down the road from me and so this friend called me and asked, “Would you please go to the burn unit at UNC Memorial Hospital and minister to the MacGowan family?” The father, whose name was Gerald, is almost certainly going to die. He’s not a Christian but his family are and they need help. He couldn’t get there because it was two and a half hours away. I said sure, I would do that. So what he called me to do was twofold. First, he wanted me to go and minister to people in an extraordinarily difficult circumstance, an extreme situation which is hard enough for any pastor in any congregation. And to do so with people I had never met, new nothing about. The second was, he wanted me to go into a burn unit and I don’t know about you, but I have a weak stomach for stuff like that. So I did. I went and I spent a couple of hours with that family. The man died while I was there. I prayed with him, I took his hand, which had no skin on it, in my hand and prayed over him for his salvation. I’ve looked back on that for thirty years now and say, “How did I do that?” And I realize I didn’t do it. I could never have done that on my own. My uncomfortableness with people I don’t know and my weak stomach around people who have suffered injuries or were hurt would’ve been certain barriers to my being able to do that if I had operated solely in my own strength. I could never have done that. It would have been impossible with me. But with God, well, I knew as I was going up to Chapel Hill this was going to have to be His doing. I couldn’t begin to tell you what I told them or what I said to them that night. I don’t really remember what transpired. And I’m not sure if I was entirely conscious of it at the time. But I knew that somehow or another God worked through me simply because I let Him and let the barrier to discipleship on that occasion drop away. Not by my strength, Lord, but by thine alone. And that is how we sell all we have and give it away. That’s how we sell every barrier to discipleship and give it away, giving it to Him.