Sunday, October 13, 1991
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE GOOD LIFE
Mark 10:17-27

During the 34 years of my ministry, many people have come to me at one time or another, as they have to all ministers, and said something like this: “I am in desperate trouble and I need the help of God.” The troubles have been of every kind. Here’s someone who has lost his job, or someone else who has been diagnosed with cancer. A marriage of 12 years is now ready to break apart, or parents have come to talk about a child gone wrong. I could go on and on with more specific examples of trouble.

However, never in these 34 years has someone come to me and said, “I am living the good life on easy street. Now I need the help of God to deal with my good fortune. Please pray for me.”

Now you may reply, “The reason that no one like that has ever come to ask for the help of God is because there are no people in our time who are living the good life on easy street.” And I would answer, “Certainly, there are few people for whom life is always devoid of trouble or problems. And yet there are individuals who have no overwhelming defeat in their backgrounds, no bitter disappointments, and for whom life has been, all in all, quite smooth. There are many people in our society who, overall, have had good fortune, some of whom have inherited large sums of money or who have been lucky. No, I do not think that is the reason for my experience. The reason, I suspect, is the fact that most of us, when life is good, when we are living on easy street, think that the Christian faith has little to say to us. We don’t need the help of God to handle our good fortune. We can handle it quite well ourselves, thank you.”

Statistically, it has been well documented over the years that in good times in a country like ours, church attendance tends to drop, whereas in bad times, it rises. Along the same line, in the most prosperous economic times, people give a smaller proportion of their income to churches, and in times of economic recession or depression, they give a larger percentage of their incomes.

The same is true for individuals as it is for society as a whole. Those who have the good life, who are the most fortunate and have the highest incomes, give the smallest percentage of their incomes to the church and to other charities, whereas those individuals who have lower incomes give a much larger percentage of their incomes. Isn’t it true that most of us, when we’re living the good life, tend to put our Christian faith on the sidelines? It becomes another leisure-time activity, something else we do when we have nothing else on the agenda. To put it another way, God becomes less important to us. We have other gods we are worshiping.

For years now, I’ve been fascinated by observing the habits of people’s attendance at worship. Some will not miss a Sunday for six months or even a year, and then they’ll disappear for a while. Why, I do not know. Six months later, they reappear.

What has happened? Why the break? Has living the good life on easy street led them to believe that worship is not important?

Here, then, are some of the important things the Christian faith has to say to us who might be living the good life on easy street.

I. The first thing our faith says is that we need God more in good times, when we are on easy street, than when we are in trouble. But it does not appear that way to those of us on easy street. Rather, it looks as though we have no need for the help and nourishment of God. We do not think we are in any great danger. Our bank account is balanced. We are paying our bills on time. Our health is strong. We have a good job. We have one or more nice automobiles to drive. If we are married, our marriage seems safe. We have a nice home in which to live and enough food to eat. What can actively practicing our Christian faith provide for us that we don't already have?

Yet just when we think we have it all is when we're in the greatest danger. There are at least five kinds of danger.

One danger is that we can be living in a fool's paradise because it's so easy to believe that good fortune is ours because we deserve it, or that we have earned it, and some of us even come to think of ourselves as better than others and more blessed by God.
Someone once said, "Both sides of easy street are lined with buildings that have false, fake romantic fronts that conceal the real nature of existence, and it is all too easy for us who live on easy street to be deceived into believing that we are in charge; that life, after all, is easy if you know the tricks of the trade; that money can do anything and everything, and that easy street is the way to happiness." My friends, when we are in that condition and begin to entertain that kind of thinking, we are in the greatest danger of all.

The stories in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus remind us over and over again that God is in charge, not we. And all that we have is a gift from God. In the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy quotes God as declaring, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth." In the New Testament, Jesus calls a man who is living the good life on easy street a fool because he forgets that God has given him everything he has.

Another danger when living on easy street is that we tend to forget that Jesus said, "The more we have, the more it is required of us." Those who have more have more to manage in a responsible fashion. Those who have more are expected to give more. The danger is that the more we have, the more stingy we become.

The third danger is that living the good life on easy street will cause us to lose our souls. Jesus said, "What does it profit us if we gain the whole world and lose our own souls?" And in the story from the Gospel of Mark about the rich man coming to Jesus, he said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth 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." Most of us do not pay any attention to that statement because we do not think of ourselves as being rich. Yet according to God's standards, most of us are rich.

Another danger of easy street is that it can be too comfortable. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

Living the comfortable good life on easy street carries with it the danger of moral flabbiness. And there's a lot of that around in our time. Adversity has a way of bringing its own discipline. We do not like it, but when we are struck down with disease or have some other kind of

serious trouble in our lives, yet that experience brings its own discipline. It has a cleansing value. It can help refine our moral and spiritual fiber.

Living the good life on easy street does not bring anything like that. Rather, it makes it appear that we do not need any discipline because we have done so well. To put it another way, the danger of living on easy street is that it begins to appear to us that the easy thing is the natural thing, and the natural thing is the right thing. So we begin to go on a declining path toward moral degeneration. It's happening in our society right now, over and over again. We see it at every level in life, from Congress on down.

Day after day, in this secular civilization with all of its exaggerated emphasis on image, materialism, and consuming, we are tempted more and more to believe that the easy way is the right way. We are lured by invitations to "easy" credit and "easy" payments. Easy, easy, easy. Deferred gratification is considered bad. It's no wonder that we believe we live on easy street.

The only antidote to this kind of wrong thinking is the daily discipline of our Christian faith, which, if we pay attention to it, reminds us that the easy way is not always the right way. I believe that we who are living the good life on easy street need the discipline of our religious faith more than we need it at any other time. More fatal accidents occur on easy street than on any other street in the world. It is not the petty thieves in our society who worry me. It is the thievery in high places, often technically legal although ethically rotten, that is breaking the moral backbone of our society.

There is yet another danger for those of us living the good life on easy street. We are in danger of starvation, not because we don't have enough food, but because we have the wrong kind of food. All of us know that diet makes a difference. And when you analyze the diet of many of us who are living the good life on easy street, it is not very strong in those things that nourish the spirit. We are in danger of spiritual starvation. When was the last time you read a serious book that nourished and fed your spirit? When was the last time you practiced daily prayer in a disciplined way?
Even that is not enough. One reason I talk so much about the importance of regular church attendance in worship is that churches like this one are spiritual feeding stations, and those of us who live the good life on easy street need to be here regularly for spiritual nourishment. Sure, you can take the easy way out and say that you can meet God on the golf course, or by taking a nature walk, or maybe even by sleeping late and then sitting on the deck and reading the Sunday paper while you have your Sunday morning coffee.

Emily Dickinson wrote a short poem about finding God in nature, which is warm and fuzzy but misses the point.

Some keep the Sabbath going to church — I keep it staying at home — With a Bobolink for a Chorister — And an Orchard for a Dome — Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice — I just wear my wings — And instead of tolling the bell, for Church Our little Sexton — sings —

God preaches, a noted Clergyman — And the sermon is never long, So instead of getting to heaven, at last — I'm going all along.

But it is unlikely that the God you encounter at any of these places will call your life to account or challenge your ethics or renew your moral foundation. It is unlikely that in one of these places, you will hear God say: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy,

and walk humbly with your God?" It is unlikely in these places you will hear Jesus say what he said to the man who came to him and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And in his situation, Jesus told him, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Dear friends, those of us who live the good life on easy street need to hear God's word more than those in trouble.

II. There is yet another thing that needs to be said to those who are living the good life on easy street. If we want to have a vital life-sustaining faith in God so that when trouble comes to us, the time to begin to build that faith is when we are living the good life on easy street. I believe that many people mistakenly believe that they can have a strong religious faith on a part-time basis and that they can get it quickly full-time should that become necessary, or that it is a good thing for a rainy day, that it is worth having in the background in case we need it in time of emergency. However, a deep and abiding faith is not a part-time activity. Spiritual strength, like physical strength, can't be obtained immediately on demand.

Most human activities can be divided into two groups — the part-time and the full-time. So, for example, travel for many people is a wonderful part-time activity. We would not want to travel all the time. It would lose its attraction and fascination. The more occasional it is, the more alluring it is. But the great pursuits in life are not like that. You cannot have a part-time family. Some people have tried it. You cannot have a part-time friendship. You cannot have part-time integrity. You cannot have part-time marital fidelity.

If you want to have a faith that sustains you and carries you when trouble does come your way, then it needs to be more than part-time, and you need to make it full-time while you are living the good life on easy street.

Furthermore, a full-time faith brings a joy to life that can be had in no other way, whether we are living the good life on easy street or in the midst of trouble. The fact is, we need a vital Christian faith more while living the good life on easy street than at any other time. I invite you to begin building that life-sustaining faith today. It will help you become the kind of person God meant you to be. Amen.