

With God All Things Are Possible – Mark 10:17-27

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him. Romans 15:13

Have you ever buttoned up your shirt wrong? You started sliding the buttons through their holes unaware that there was any problem until you got to the end. That's when you noticed something was wrong. All of a sudden you have an extra button. You look into the mirror to see that the whole shirt is buttoned wrong. What happened? Even though it seemed like everything was fine you messed up the beginning. You didn't put the first button through the right hole and so the whole shirt was buttoned wrong. Because you messed up the beginning the whole thing was completely wrong.

The rich young man we read about in Mark's gospel finds himself in this situation. He thought everything was going well. He was obeying God's commands and he had lots of money. But he had the beginning all wrong. Instead of placing his confidence in Jesus, he trusted all the stuff in his life. Stuff like his faithful obedience to the Law and his wealth. With these things he thought he could earn his salvation. But Jesus shows him his error. Jesus shows him to start not by asking "What must I do?" but instead to turn his trust away from himself and into the certain wounds of Jesus.

Many people seek the answer to the question: "What must I do to be saved?" And as many people as have asked the question there have been as many answers given. It has been a common quest throughout history to find some way to please God. The rich young man asks the question hoping that the answer lay in his obedience of the law. The crowds whom Jesus fed with only five loaves of bread and two fish also ask Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

The Hindu or Buddhist seeks the answer to the question as well. They hope that by their own good works they are somehow pleasing the universe and earning themselves a better life. The one who clutches their rosary, praying that through the recitations of "Hail Marys" he or she is earning God's favor, is saying the same thing this rich young man is saying. "What must I do to be saved?"

When we try to earn God's favor on our own we fail to see our own depravity. We don't truly understand what miserable creatures we are by nature. We are completely empty of our own merit and incapable of accomplishing the task. Earning God's love is impossible for us. It would be like trying to empty the ocean with a bucket or trying to fill the Grand Canyon with a garden shovel and wheelbarrow. We are simply unequal to the task.

God has set the standard for salvation. If you want to be saved, be perfect. Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother. And this is just part of God's law. He expands on these things telling us to always be loving, always be content, do not have lustful thoughts in your heart, always be willing to help others. Who can say they have done these things? Every day of their life? Never once failing in any way? Not one person can say they have obeyed God's commands. It is clear each of us is too weak for the task of trying to earn our own salvation.

Yet the rich young man seemed to have everything. If you have a daughter, he is the kind of guy you want her to bring home. He does everything right. He attends church. He is polite. He is respectful. He really seems to care what God says. And on top of his flawless character the guy has got money. He comes from a wealthy family and who knows, probably invites all his friends to sit in the sky box at the coliseum.

But when he comes to Jesus asking, "What must I do to be saved?" Jesus, like a skilled surgeon, identifies the problem. Jesus shows the rich young man that he had messed up the beginning. He failed to grasp his own depravity, his own sinfulness. So instead of saying, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner," and asking for forgiveness he asks, "What must I do to be saved?" So Jesus gives him a command, one that he cannot obey. He tells him to be generous. "One thing you lack. Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor. Then you will have treasures in heaven." With this command Jesus shows the man that he cannot do what it takes to be saved. The once prideful man is made to see his own inadequacies.

And we are told that the law has the desired effect on this man. Mark says, "His face fell." Have you ever had to tell a child some disappointing news? Maybe you had to tell a child that the family vacation would have to be cancelled this year or that their best friend couldn't sleep over like they were planning. Their whole body language shows their disappointment and sadness. You can see it in their face. So it was with this man. He was made to see how useless his own obedience was for his salvation. But Jesus brought this man to his knees so that he might stop looking to himself and instead look to Jesus.

"Jesus looked at him and loved him." He loved him so much that he wanted him to understand what he was going to do. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time in order to suffer and die to pay for the sins of the whole world. Not only could this man not do anything to save himself, he didn't need to. "Jesus looked at him and loved him," knowing that all this man's sins would soon be paid for. The rich young man needed to do anything. Jesus would do it all.

If Jesus was going to forgive all the sins of the entire world, why would he say, "Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor." If Jesus has done all the work, why did this man need to sell all his stuff? Jesus never requires that we sell everything we have and give to the poor? He wants to point out this man's sin. He wants to show him that he is placing his wealth and money above God. That is why he says, "How hard it is for the rich to inherit the kingdom of God."

Jesus is not saying that money is a sin. Heaven is not some reverse status symbol that only the poor have. Wealth is a gift from God that can be used by us to serve God and others. Every week we collect an offering so that the members of Grace have an opportunity to serve God and others with their money. So there is nothing inherently wrong with money or wealth.

Jesus is warning us about the dangers of wealth and money. The United States is a country that has been blessed with extreme wealth. The things we enjoy here are unparalleled. There are places in the world that would think our poorest citizens have more than they could even imagine. Even in the worst economy in seventy years we all have roofs over our heads and clothes on our back and food on our table. And many of us have very nice roofs over our heads that cover our expensive appliances and

furniture. The clothes we wear are not just for keeping us covered and warm but are designed to make us more beautiful or popular. We eat not always because we are hungry and need food but sometimes just because it tastes good.

And with all this wealth comes a sense of security and self worth. As the numbers in our bank account grow larger, we know that we will be taken care of. And we must be important or smart or well liked enough for us to have all that wealth. And pretty soon it becomes obvious that we are kind of a big deal. And with money and wealth it is so easy to not things like sin get in the way of our own self worth, our own importance. We forget about being generous, in the way that God has been so generous to us. And why share what I have? After all, I must have done something to deserve the wealth and money that other people have not done, otherwise they would have what I have.

Jesus says in Matthew chapter six that “No one can serve two masters. Either he will love the one and despise the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

The rich young man had worked and loved his Master. He trusted in his money to care for him. It was what he served. He loved it more than God, so much so that when God himself asked him to get rid of it, he goes away. It was more difficult for to him to imagine his life without money than without God. He had made money his idol. With this kind of trust in wealth, with this kind of service to money, salvation is as difficult as trying to get a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

We would be missing the point if we think that it is just money Jesus is warning us about here. It is not just the rich for whom it is more difficult to be saved than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Jesus could have just as easily said, “How difficult it is for those with many friends to enter the kingdom of God.” Or “How difficult it is for those with athleticism to enter the kingdom of God.” Or “How difficult it is for the weekend warrior to enter the kingdom of God.” Money isn’t the only thing we can love more than God. There are as many things in our lives that we could make idols. What would Jesus say to you? One thing you lack, “Give up your friends and you will have treasure in heaven.” Give up your ability to turn on a fastball and you will have treasures in heaven.” “Give up your Saturdays and you will have treasures in heaven.”

And so we realize that we have clung more tightly to things more tightly than we have clung to God. We have loved stuff more than God. So we have to say with the disciples, “Who then can be saved.” Certainly not any of us here. We all share the same sickness of clinging to earthly things. Entering the kingdom of God sounds impossible.

But Jesus ends this lesson by reminding his disciples that nothing is impossible with God. Nothing is impossible for the God who parted the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk through on dry land. Nothing is impossible for the God who fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Nothing is impossible for the God who made the deaf hear and the blind see and the lame walk. And while earning our salvation was impossible for us, nothing, is impossible for God.

It is by his work that we can enter the kingdom of God. It was his Son Jesus who lived in our place and died in our place. And it was Jesus who impossibly was raised to life on the third day assuring us that we also will be raised from the dead to enter the kingdom of God with him. "No one is good – except God alone." And he has done all things for you to be saved.

Now to him who is able to establish you by (the) gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, ... to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Romans 16:25