

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸ *“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”*

²⁰ *“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”*

²¹ *Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

²² *At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

²³ *Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”*

²⁴ *The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

²⁶ *The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”*

²⁷ *Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” (Mark 10:17-27)*

All Things are Possible with God

“Anything’s possible.” What do you mean when you say that? Most of the time, don’t we mean that it’s not very likely? When I was a child, I really wanted to be an astronaut. Someone might ask if I still might do that at this point in my life. I might answer, “Well, anything’s possible.” NASA could decide it needs a near-sighted Lutheran minister at the International Space Station. But I don’t think they will. Is that what Jesus was saying in our gospel lesson for today when he said, “All things are possible with God?” Obviously not. Jesus was saying that nothing is hard for God. He said it at a moment when his disciples were disturbed by the implications of something else Jesus had just said. If we’re honest, there are times when we share the disciples’ concerns, times when we wonder how it could ever be possible for sinners like us to reach eternal life. At that moment, when all we can see is our own weakness and failure, Jesus speaks these words to us: **all things are possible with God.**

In our gospel lesson, a man runs up to Jesus. He has a question that is urgent in his mind: **“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** Do you see the problem with the man’s question? Jesus tried to show him the problem by asking him a counter question: **“Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.”** Jesus was not denying either that he was good or that he was God. He was trying to get this man to examine his assumptions. This man thought that he could do whatever it was that God demanded to get eternal life. He just needed to know what that was. Jesus prompted him to think about what it means to really be good.

Unfortunately, the man didn’t take the bait, so Jesus listed off several of the Ten Commandments. It is absolutely true that if we could keep those commandments perfectly, we would earn eternal life. But the key is that word “perfectly.” What would that mean? Not what this man thought it would mean. He claimed he had kept the Ten Commandments since he was a boy. But there is much more to obeying the commandments than our actions. Jesus tells us that when a man looks at a woman with lust, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So even if a husband never cheats on his wife, even if a single person never has sex outside of marriage, every lustful thought makes us guilty. The Bible says that hatred equals murder, that coveting equals stealing. God judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. The Bible goes so far as to say that if we keep the whole law perfectly, and break it just one time, we’re guilty of breaking all of it. God treats his law like a window pane. If you have a big glass window like we have here in church and a stone flies from a lawn mower and breaks it just down in the corner, is the window broken? Yes. You can’t just replace the corner. You have to replace the whole thing. God’s law is like that. It describes one perfect life of love. Every sin breaks all of it. In my catechism class, I often explain it this way: if you live to be 117 years old and you never sin, and then

one day, you're at the nursing home and the aide brings you green jello instead of orange jello and you lose your temper and throw the jello at that poor worker, and that's the only sin you ever commit, those 117 years of perfection are cancelled by that one sin.

That's how God looks at our lives. So when this man insisted that he had obeyed the law since he was a child, what was Jesus to do? I might have trotted out all the passages and tried to argue with him and get him to admit that he had lusted or hated or coveted. I might have found myself deep in an argument about whether something is a sin if you only think about it. But Jesus didn't allow himself to be drawn into a debate. And do you know why? He wasn't interested in winning an argument. Mark says, "**Jesus looked at him and loved him.**" Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us this story and they all include different details. But only Mark says this. It jumps off the page. What Jesus did next, came entirely from love.

Now it might not have sounded that way, because what Jesus did was preach the law. But he did that because he loved this man. How does that work? Real love always does what is best for a person. It even speaks hard truths that a person needs to hear. This man was in danger of going to hell because he believed that he could save himself. Jesus wanted to rescue him. So he proclaimed the law to him. But he did it in a way that might confuse us today. He told the man to go and sell everything he had and give it all to the poor and then he would have treasure in heaven. He told him to leave his comfortable life and follow Jesus – become one of Jesus' disciples.

What does all that mean? Is Jesus telling us that poverty is more God-pleasing than wealth? Is he telling us that if we give all we have to the poor, we will earn points with God? No. That would go against everything that the Bible tells us about how we get to heaven. We don't earn it. Jesus won it. But he was preaching the law, and the law calls us to sacrifice for the good of others. And you can see the effect of the law in how the man reacted. Mark says, "**At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.**" Jesus understood that this man's real sin was against the First Commandment, you shall have no other gods. He had at least two other gods: himself as a person who was able to earn eternal life and his money. Jesus was asking him to put God ahead of his wealth. He was simply unwilling to do that.

But this man wasn't the only person Jesus loved. He looked at his disciples who had seen this whole conversation and he loved them, too. So he said, "**How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!**" He said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Those are pretty strong words. He was saying, in effect, it's impossible for a rich person to enter heaven. Why? Because wealth is seductive. It demands our love. It sneaks up in our hearts and makes itself our god. How much time and energy do we put into protecting our wealth? How much time do we spend on wills and investments and retirement accounts? That's all in addition to all the hours and all the effort we spend earning that money and all the years and all the money we spent training just so we could get a job and have that wealth.

Lest you think that what Jesus said doesn't really apply to us because we aren't all that rich, consider the disciples' reaction. Mark says that they were amazed and they said to each other, "**Who then can be saved?**" They said it first to each other. They were like students in a classroom or members in a congregation who hear something troubling and before they raise their hand to ask about it, they talk it over among themselves. They reached exactly the conclusion that Jesus wanted them to reach: nobody can be saved if this is true. Make no mistake about it, they were recognizing that they were too wealthy to get into heaven.

Compared to us, they had nothing. They weren't even working regular jobs at this point in their lives. They were studying with Jesus and being supported by a group of wealthy women who paid their basic living expenses. Like most people in the ancient world, they probably had, at most, one change of clothes, and their cloak was also their blanket. They were struck by Jesus' words. We are rich by the standards of most of the world. No matter how jealous we might be of people who can afford million dollar homes and vacations in Europe, you and I are among the richest ten percent of the world's population. We have the best medical care in the world. We have the widest variety of food in our diets for the least amount of money of any people anywhere. We have furnaces in our homes that let us live through the winter and air conditioners that make the summer comfortable. Our kids don't go to bed hungry.

Does all that wealth get in the way of our love for God? If Jesus told us to sell all that we have and give it to the poor, would we walk away sad? Now, Jesus does not tell us to do that. But he does tell us to be generous in helping the poor. How many of us consciously do that? How many of us actually include helping those in need in our monthly budgets? He tells us to support the work of the church. How many of us bring a

regular offering that reflects the way God has blessed us? How many of us resent the appeals for money that come from our church? How many of us, deep in our hearts, love our money more than God?

Those questions are hard for us to hear. We want to believe that we're good people, the kind of Christians God wants. But every sin breaks the first commandment because every sin puts something in God's place. And because Jesus loves us, he tells us how hard it is for rich sinners like us to enter the kingdom of God. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich American like you and me to get to heaven. I don't do a lot of sewing, but I've seen my wife's needles. I couldn't even push a small dog through those eyes, let alone a camel. Jesus wants you and me to realize that we could never overcome our natural sin and greed. We could never overcome the idolatry that lies at the heart of every one of our sins. Left to ourselves, we will always choose a different god and then tell ourselves that we're good people and God should be happy to have us. If we have a nagging doubt like this rich man must have had, we'll look for something to make ourselves feel better. We'll try to find some charity or some service in the congregation, that will put us over the top and then we'll deserve to go to heaven. All that is a lie that can only lead us to hell.

Who then can be saved? That was the disciples' searching question and the law may bring it up in our minds, too. But that's not where the reading ends. Jesus answered, "**With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.**" That's the whole reason Jesus came – to conquer our sin and free us from what our greed and idolatry deserve. He did that by living in our place. No man was ever more free of greed than Jesus. He left behind heaven itself and the glory of being the Son of God to live a life that you and I wouldn't want to touch. He sacrificed everything because that was his Father's plan to save us and his Father had first place in his heart. That all counts for us. God sees us as humble and generous and above all as perfectly faithful in worshipping him because Jesus was all those things for us.

And Jesus died and paid for all the times and all the ways that we put anything in God's place. He paid for our greed and our lust. He paid for our pride that thinks God's lucky to have us. He paid for our failure to constantly follow him and love and honor God above all else. Jesus died and his blood washed all that sin away. He rose to tell us we are forgiven. He rose to tell us that we will indeed enter the kingdom of God. In fact, he rose to tell us that he will work every day through the gospel, through our pastors, through every good and every bad thing that happens in our lives to bring us home to heaven. On Judgment Day, Jesus himself will invite us to enter the kingdom prepared by our Father since the creation of the world.

With God all things are indeed possible. You and I have triumphed already and no matter how sinful we feel on any given day. God is greater than our sin. God is greater than our hearts and all the ways they condemn us. God is greater than all the temptations we face in this world and all the ways the devil tries to sidetrack us and steal our faith. With God all things are possible, even the impossible things. He has given us faith. He has taken away our sin. He will bring us home to heaven. Amen.