**Mark 10:17-27** October 10, 2021

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*Mark 10:17 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. 19You 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.” 21Jesus 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.” 22At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

*23Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” 24The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 26The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” 27Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

When you copy someone else’s words, pawn them off as your own as your own brilliant idea and don’t give credit to the real author—that’s plagiarism. It’s intellectual laziness, stolen valor of a sort. Which means I need to thank a certain college professor of my past for the theme of this sermon. In our Lutheran college, every day, between second and third hour, we had chapel. One professor in particular gave devotions that had a way of sticking in your head. He was a professor of German and history. His name was Professor Deutschlander. (Really. German professor, Lutheran college: Deutschlander. You can’t make this up. ) Anyway, every year all his devotions would be built around a single theme. Thirty years on, I can *still* remember the theme of two of his series. One of those was,

**All God Asks Is the Impossible**

I am pretty sure this reading was one of his readings that year. Anyway, Professor Deutschlander’s theme so exactly matches what Jesus is telling this young man in our reading that I had to borrow it:

**All God Asks Is the Impossible**

Something about this reading gets you right here [hand to heart]. It is a tragedy. Someone so close, who never arrives. His fatal flaw keeps him from the goodness God would give him. Like a young life cut short, like a bride left standing at the altar. What could have been! What *should* have been! And at what a moment!

***“As Jesus started on his way…”*** Jesus was finishing up an orderly, farewell, saying good-bye to the towns and villages of Palestine. He was starting his final trip to Jerusalem, the city outside of which *“surely no prophet can die”* (Lk 13:33). Jesus knew what would happen and what he would accomplish. In Jerusalem the one-time sacrifice for sin would be made, to put an end to all sacrifice for sin. So, his ministry among the people he loved had to come to an end.

As Jesus was leaving this unnamed town, an unnamed, influential, well-to-do unnamed man ran up. He gave Jesus the greatest honor and reverence he could; he bowed. He had a question. The importance of his question proved him a sincere man. He asked one of the three biggest questions of all: ***“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”***

Does that question sound strange to you?

Every station in life, every vocation has a shared occupational hazard. It’s called familiarity. Several months in, and the burger flipper thinks that he is just flipping pieces of meat on a steel griddle, forgetting that he is preparing someone’s meal, their sustenance, a happy moment in their day. The teacher loses focus, thinking, “If I can just make it to the next three-day weekend…” forgetting how those children’s futures need her attention and effort. Pastors have a similar occupational hazard with the Word of God. It gets so the familiar that sometimes it goes in the eyes, through the ears, and doesn’t make an impression. That’s my fault, not God’s.

It’s been a long time since I noticed how outrageous this man’s question is: ***“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” [repeat slowly]***

What if someone shows up on your mom and dad’s porch one day when you just so happen to be visiting. From the living room you overhear the conversation. The stranger on the porch asks your mom, “So, what can I do to inherit some of this?” I’d put money on it that you’d jump off the couch, race for the door, and give the stranger a piece of your mind. If this guy isn’t a scam artist—though he surely sounds like one—but if he’s not, you are wondering what watermelon wagon he just fell off. That’s not how inheritances operate. First, you don’t work to get them. And second, you don’t weasel your way in.

***“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*** This man had a fundamental problem. He didn’t get it about him and God and heaven. Our ever patient Lord tried to draw him toward understanding.

***“****You want to earn heaven, do you?* ***You know the Law…”*** and Jesus listed off the commandments. He started with the easy ones, at least easy for those who don’t understand how God’s commandments work. ***“Do not murder…”*** “Yep, got that one, Teacher.” ***“Do no commit adultery. Do not steal.”*** “Those too.” ***“Do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.”*** “No problem.” This man does not understand that God’s Law is not just about actions. It *“penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”* (Heb 4:12).

But, instead of straight out telling him, Jesus wants this man to feel it. He *needs* this man to feel it. ***“Jesus looked at him and loved him… ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ ”***

Jesus asks what he knows this man can’t deliver. That young man may think himself godly. Maybe he is by comparison to others. But not before God. This “ask” by Jesus was meant to put this man in an impossible situation. Jesus wanted him to realize himself as unworthy. He can’t inherit eternal life on his own merits. Jesus was telling him, “If that’s how you want to go about this, *All God Asks Is the Impossible.*”

When this man heard that *All God Asks Is the Impossible*, he walked away. He had thought so much of Jesus. Now he thought so much less of him. He had thought Jesus and he were on the same page. They’re not.

People have different answers to God’s demand for the impossible. Others, when they hear God’s impossible ask, they shake their fist at God. “That’s unfair!” God usually mercifully gives them time to cool off and come to their senses, though they often don’t.

Others when they hear God ask the impossible, they are not so humble as this rich man. They keep on insisting, ***“Teacher, all these I have kept.”*** I’ve heard people say it this way, “Pastor, you know, I’m not a bad person.” Look, no Christian in the Bible ever said that, “I’m not a bad person.” God’s people in the Bible said things like, *“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”* (Lk 5:8). That was the Apostle Peter. They say, *“I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:6). That was Job. God’s people say, *“I am nothing but dust and ashes”* (Gen 18:27).That was Abraham. They say, *“I confess that I am by nature sinful and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words and actions.”* That was you 20 minutes ago. This is what God’s people say when God asks the impossible. They say, “I need Jesus! I need a Savior!”

As Jesus watched that very sincere man, turn away, he turned toward his followers and said, ***“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God”*** The disciples were amazed. The were amazed because unlike us who have a skeptical view of the rich, Jewish rabbis taught that wealth was a divine stamp of approval. Jesus’ appraisal of this wealthy, God-searching man—the mental math just wasn’t adding up.

Their teacher continued, ***“It is easier for a camel”***—the largest animal that most of them would ever see***—“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle”***—the smallest opening they knew of—***“[easier] than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*** Jesus isn’t talking about something that is difficult, something that maybe if you really set your mind to it, it could be done. Not at all!

Seeing the scandalized look on the disciples’ faces Jesus keeps going, ***“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”***

But just here we have a problem. ***“All things are possible with God”*** is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. Popular Christianity these days likes these nice little sayings you put on wall hangings, rugs and coffee mugs that make us feel good about ourselves. “Me and God, we’re a team. We can make this happen.” ***“All things are possible with God”*** That is not what Jesus is saying. First of all, it ignores the first part, ***“With man this is impossible.”*** It ignores our sinfulness, our fallenness.

Second, there is a misunderstanding in the word “with.” “With” can be understood a couple different ways. Let me give you an example.

A football player might say, “With Tom Brady on our team, we can win the championship.” It’s Tom, me and the rest of the guys working together. The word “with” also has a very different meaning. “I could never throw a football 30 yards. With Tom, it is totally different.” There, “with” means that it is all about Tom. I have no part in it. Same word, two totally different ways of taking it. In that second one, what we really mean is, “For Tom Brady it is no problem to throw the ball 30 yards.”

When Jesus says, “All things are possible with God,” our human ears instinctively hear what we want to hear, “With God, he and me together, we got this.” That’s not what Jesus is saying. He means “with” the other way. We would better understand it, ***“[For] man this is impossible, but not [for] God; all things are possible [for] God.”*** This isn’t Pastor Martin’s “take” on the matter, this is what the Greek actually says. (Arndt & Gingerich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, para: II.2.c.) Jesus is telling his followers what we hear in Ephesians 2: *“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”* 100% God’s gift; 0% our work.

Why do I push this point on ***“All things are possible with God”?*** To prove others wrong? No. The point is to understand what Jesus told his disciples and is telling us. Do not underestimate how badly we need Jesus! That was this rich man’s mistake! He wanted a hand in his own salvation, and that is impossible. That’s why Jesus asked the impossible—so that he would stop pushing away the gift Jesus was giving him. We are lost in our sins without Jesus. Celebrate what he has done. He has won eternal life for us through his life and death! Give credit to the Holy Spirit for planting faith in your heart. It’s all God’s doing. Live a life of thankfulness for it!

One last thing: This man, while sincere, was no Christian. But there is something *we* should take away even as Christians.

For this man, wealth was his stumbling block. Jesus knew that as long as his wealth was prominent in his life, he could not follow him. Each of us has our own Achilles’ heal, that point of weakness, something deep down in our hearts that doesn’t want to give God his due. Maybe we know it. Maybe like this rich man, we are unaware.

Maybe for you too it is wealth: making sure you have enough laid aside for retirement, or just to pay the bills. Maybe it’s family time that you just can’t get in at any other time except Sunday, so God time has to suffer. Is it that you have other things that need to get done. Cutting the grass? Really? Golf over God? Staying up too late with friends, or online? You want to make that case when you stand before Jesus’ judgment seat? What is it for you? What battles for your attention at 10:30am on Sunday morning? How is the fight going? Do you need to sell something? To sacrifice something? What keeps you from daily time in prayer, in God’s Word? What keeps the good habits of a Christian life from happening in your life?

All that God asks is the impossible. Impossible for you, that is. But you who have been redeemed by Christ, and now Christ lives in you. Now, with him in you, even the otherwise impossible becomes possible. All praise be to God. Amen.