

With Man This Is Impossible, But Not With God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 13 through 31.

A reading from the Gospel according to Mark. People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them. 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? Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not murder.

[1 : 15] You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother. Teacher, he declared, all these I have kept since I was a boy.

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.

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, children, how hard it is 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.

The disciples were even more amazed and said to each other, who then can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said, with man this is impossible, but not with God.

[2 : 13] All things are possible with God. Then Peter spoke up. We have left everything to follow you. Truly I tell you, Jesus replied, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age, homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields, along with persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and the last first. This is the gospel of the Lord. Thanks be to the Lord Christ. Good morning, Christ Church. We continue today in the gospel of Mark, and we are exploring this story of a guy we call the rich young ruler.

And we know in this text we just read that he's rich. He's got significant wealth, real estate, trust fund, great possessions.

We know in the gospel of Matthew that he's young. He's got his health. He's got energy. He's got idealism and optimism, hope for the future. And we know that in the gospel of Luke, he's a ruler.

He's got some social standing. He has authority. He's some type of influencer. And he seems to have it all, and yet he realizes that there's something missing.

[3 : 37] Hence his question, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Today we would call this young man a spiritual seeker, an inquirer. He's exploring matters of eternal life and metaphysical reality and permanent things.

And in this meaning crisis that we've been experiencing in the early 21st century, we send many young men and women like this who run up to and kneel down before YouTube gurus and experts, seeking some truth, seeking to fill this gap that they sense in their lives.

And Jesus' response to this rich young ruler is actually, it's quite complex, and it's super challenging.

Of all the people that ever came to Jesus, you would think that this type of guy would be the ideal attractive candidate that Jesus would want to see coming to him.

You would think that Jesus just received him with open arms and welcomed him, and he would have entered into the kingdom of God without any difficulty at all. I mean, this is the most desirable recruit for Jesus' band of disciples that you could imagine.

[4 : 55] And what Jesus says to this potential recruit is amazing. He increases his challenge to such a degree that this guy's face is fallen and he walks away sad.

This text says that Jesus loved this man, that he really wanted him to follow, that Jesus really must have been sad when this man turned away as well.

And Jesus' disciples find this moment really hard to understand. They're utterly confounded. They say in verse 26, they're amazed and they look at each other and they say, who then can be saved?

If this ideal recruit who has it all materially and morally can't be saved, then who can? Jesus, this is too much. You can't lose a recruit like this.

We need you to dial down your challenge a little bit. We need you to take a class on diplomacy and negotiation, right? Jesus, have you ever read the book, How to Win Friends and Influence People?

[6 : 00] Maybe you should read that. Maybe you should run your message through our marketing department and our PR firm to make it an easier, more palatable, more strategic message if we're going to grow our numbers.

Why, Jesus? Why, Jesus, are you driving people away who seem like they could really contribute to this community of disciples and to our mission?

Well, what does Jesus say to this man? And what causes him to turn away from Jesus grieving and sorrowful? You can turn, if you like, in your pew Bibles to this passage.

It's in Mark chapter 10. I can't remember the page, but what I hope you'll see there is Jesus is talking about the goodness we lack, the impossible entry, and the enormous cost.

That's what I want to explore together this morning. The goodness you lack, the impossible entry, and the enormous cost. Let's start with the goodness you lack.

[7 : 06] The top of the story in verse 17, it says, 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?

And this is an excellent young man. He's been living a good, noble, and moral life. And yet he's conscious. He's aware of the fact that he needs something more.

He needs something further. He says, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And this is a sign that God is at work in him, right? Because he knows that he's not self-contained.

He knows he doesn't have all the answers, and he goes looking for them. And perhaps he's been in the crowd following Jesus, listening to Jesus, and he's heard Jesus talking about these things we hear in our story, inheriting eternal life, entering the kingdom of God, being saved, having treasure in heaven.

These, for Jesus, are all different ways of talking about the same reality. And Jesus has been talking about this from the beginning of the gospel. Mark chapter 1, verse 15 says that Jesus went about proclaiming the gospel of God, saying, the kingdom of God is here.

[8 : 15] Repent and believe in the good news. And what Jesus has done is he's taken this great theme of the Bible, the kingdom of God, and he's telling people that the most important thing in the world is that we should enter into that kingdom.

In the Sermon on the Mount, he says, seek first the kingdom of God. And when he says that, he says, nothing takes priority over this kingdom. Everything else is secondary to this kingdom.

And you would think that with such a message and such a messenger, that all the people listening to Jesus would have believed and would have gone storming into the kingdom. They would have just been rushing like a mob into the kingdom of God.

But that's not what happened. And this young man is a case study for why that is. This rich young ruler, he's better than most people around him, but he begins to feel a sense of dissatisfaction because he hears Jesus and he hears his gospel.

And he realizes, I hear Jesus talking about eternal life, but I don't think I have it. And I don't know how to get it. And so in his eagerness and in his desire and his zeal, he runs to Jesus and he kneels down in respect for Jesus.

[9 : 36] He admires Jesus. He knows he's no ordinary teacher. He knows this is a unique and exceptional person. And he asks the right question about eternal life.

And Jesus loves him. Jesus likes his question. He likes his attitude. He can see that God's at work in his life. And what do we anticipate happens next?

Don't we assume that this young man will just go straight into the kingdom of God without any difficulty at all? But that's not the story. And many, many people have this story.

This guy comes up to the gate of entry to the kingdom of God, but he turned his back on Jesus because he was dismayed and disheartened at the demands of Jesus.

He went away grieving and sorrowful because of the great challenge of Jesus. And why is that? Because Jesus' answer to his question is so surprising.

[10 : 36] It's so different than what all of us think and expect. Many, many people have misconceptions about the nature and the character of the kingdom of God and what it takes to enter into it.

And many, many people today think that the one thing that we need to enter into the kingdom of God and have a right relationship with God is that we need to be good. We need goodness.

We need to be caring about other people and not harming them. We need to be treating people fairly and not cheating them. We need to be preserving and protecting the liberty of other people and not oppressing them.

We need to be good. And Jesus shatters this young man's vision of goodness and shows him that actually he lacks it.

Right? This is verse 18. It says that Jesus says, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You come to me thinking that I'm a mere human being and you call me good.

[11 : 43] But what is finite and fallible human goodness in light of the infinitely pure goodness of God? Isn't it like holding up a dim candle to the sun at noonday?

And Jesus, I think, is here hinting at this man's lack of proper understanding of himself vis-a-vis God. Right? He has an insufficient anthropology and so he has a distorted theology.

God alone is the author of goodness and God alone can give goodness. So if the question is about eternal life, if it's about living with God forever, how can I live for one minute, for one second in God's home and in God's presence?

How can I enter into the kingdom of God when everything I touch gets dirty and defiled? How can I enter into the kingdom of God? How can I enter into the kingdom of God? How can I enter into the kingdom of God?

The disciples' question is the right question. Who then can be saved? Who can be delivered given this lack of human goodness? And you see, Jesus then shifts the focus in the conversation to the second half of the Ten Commandments and he holds up the mirror of God's moral law in front of this man.

[12 : 59] And he says to him in verse 19, You know the commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and your mother.

Teacher, he declared, all these I have kept since I was a boy. Now does Jesus look at him and say, You're lying. You're a liar. No, it says that he looked at him and he loved him.

He loved him. I can see that you've had a very good upbringing. I can see that you have solid parents and teachers and mentors. I can see that you have a sensitive conscience.

That you want to keep God's laws. That you've, by God's grace, you've not degraded your standards or entangled yourself morally. That you have a sincere character.

And I love you. I want you to belong. I want you to be included. I want you to follow. But then he looks at this man and he says to this man who seems to lack nothing.

[14 : 03] He says, There's one thing you lack. There's one thing you lack. And it's this that causes this man in verse 22 for his face to fall.

Literally the Greek says he was shocked and he was appalled. And he walks away grieving and sorrowful. He's deeply troubled and distressed. Why? Because, first of all, Jesus confirms to him that, yes, you currently do not possess eternal life.

And you're outside the kingdom of God. You're not saved. And when it comes to treasure in heaven, you're bankrupt. And number two, he reveals that even your human goodness, your law keeping, your morality, you're still lacking something.

Human morality, human goodness is not good enough to make yourself righteous and to please God. For no one is truly, purely, perfectly, infinitely good except for God himself.

And so you lack the kind of goodness that you need. That perfect goodness which comes from only God and from the outside in rather than your little imperfect goodness that comes up from the inside out.

[15 : 13] You see, how do you know that you've actually had a real encounter with the biblical Jesus and with the living Christ?

This story is a great story to know whether or not you've had that encounter because has Jesus questioned you? Has he held your assumptions up to the light of biblical revelation and its scrutiny?

Has he held the mirror of God's moral law up before you? Has he held you and caused you in some way to sense that you're lacking? Has he made you feel like this man walks away feeling helpless and hopeless about himself?

Has Jesus cut you to your heart and revealed to you that without the gracious intervention of God in your life, you are eternally lost and doomed and condemned?

You see, if you haven't experienced this from Jesus, you may have never actually encountered him. So this is where Jesus begins with this man, the goodness that you lack.

[16 : 31] But then he goes on and he talks not just about the goodness that you lack, but he talks about the impossible entry. The impossible entry. See, this man came to Jesus expecting him to give a particular answer to the eternal life question other than the one that he got.

He wants Jesus to confirm his preconceived ideas. And what he's hoping Jesus will say is, yes, you are good. And what you need is just to add a little something to the goodness that you've already got.

You just need a little extra something to get into the kingdom of God. He's hoping that Jesus will tell him something that he can add on to his life with comparative ease.

Right? Part of this passage, Jesus is talking about that it's very hard to enter. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle. Jesus is comparing and contrasting that which is hard and that which is easy.

And this man has fallen into the fatal fallacy that the kingdom of God is about doing another good work that I haven't yet thought of that is easily within my competence.

[17 : 43] And Jesus, again, smashes and demolishes this man's ideas. In verse 21, Jesus looked at him and he loved him and he said, One thing you lack, go sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.

Then come, follow me. You see, Jesus tells him to do something he knows he's not ready to do. So that he can see that entry into the kingdom of God is way beyond his capacity.

And that with human beings, this is actually impossible. Jesus is like a good doctor who gives you the truthful diagnosis about yourself.

Right? He's a good doctor who puts his scalpel right on the problem of your heart. And Jesus reads right into the depth and the center of this man. Just like he reads right into the depth and the center of every one of us.

He can read us like an open book because he knows us better than any of us know ourselves. Right? He can see your human nature. He can penetrate the heart of your problem and expose the real trouble, the real need in your life.

[18 : 57] And he can put it right in front of you. And when he does that, it's like he cuts and he hurts and he offends. And what is the problem with this particular man?

What is it for you? I think the key to unlock this challenge of Jesus is in verses 24 and 25. It says, If you have your pew Bible open, you'll notice that there's a footnote in verse 24.

And that's because the vast majority of ancient manuscripts have this little translation which says, How hard it is for those who trust in their riches to enter into the kingdom of God.

And there it is. This man's particular trouble was the object of his trust. And Jesus saw the thing that he was really trusting, the thing he was really relying on, the thing that he had truly put his confidence in.

There's a whole other sermon to say that having wealth and having riches is not a problem in and of itself. We'll talk about that later. But you notice that Jesus only asked this man about the second half of the Ten Commandments that have to do with all those horizontal social relationships with our neighbors.

[20 : 33] But Jesus deliberately skips over the first half of the Ten Commandments that have to do with our vertical spiritual relationship with God. And he omits that number one commandment, that first law from which all the moral law flows.

And what is that commandment? It's, You shall have no other gods before me. You shall have no other gods beside me. And see, Jesus has put his finger on the nerve of this man's real God, his first love, his true allegiance.

You see, money, like many, many things, money can just become sort of this alternative trinity in our lives, right? Instead of having the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as our Creator, Redeemer, partner, and comforter, we can very easily look at money and say, well, actually this thing is what gives me life.

And this is the thing that saves me out of trouble. And this is the thing that supplies me with strength. This is my God. And Jesus can see that. He can see that his confidence, his security, his reliance, his power, is in his money.

But don't be misled to think that Jesus is only talking about money. Because we're all trusting in something. Maybe it's your wealth. But maybe today it's your beauty.

[21 : 56] Maybe it's your health. Here in Berkeley, many of us are putting our trust in our intellect. Maybe it's your romance, or your desire for it, your career, and your climbing, your family and its well-being, your achievement, your approval in the eyes of others.

What are you trusting in? And what are you living for as if it is God? What are you putting before and beside God? For that is the thing that constitutes the obstacle to your entry into the kingdom of God.

Has Jesus exposed your trouble? And has he convicted you of your essential sin? What is it that you value and trust more than God?

And how are you leaning on yourself and your abilities and your resources rather than depending on God? Because Jesus says, it's easier for the largest land mammal in Palestine to go through the smallest opening you can imagine than it is for you or I to enter into the kingdom of God trusting in something more than God himself.

Having another little counterfeit God before and beside the true and living God as if that little created thing were God rather than the creator God himself.

[23 : 21] And see, Jesus' point, he's trying to drive home, the disciples, they hear this, their minds are blown. And they say in verse 26, who then can be saved? And Jesus looked at them and he said, with human beings this is impossible, but not with God.

All things are possible with God. The ablest and the best man or woman in the world cannot save himself or herself.

They cannot enter into the kingdom of God without some divine interference, without some sort of supernatural intervention because with human beings this is impossible.

Without the work of God in my life, without something supernatural happening in me, I can never even begin the Christian life. And without the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, I cannot possibly live the Christian life.

For human beings, the Christian life and discipleship is impossible. Friends, don't you see that the chances of you entering into the kingdom of God are about as big as the eye of a needle?

[24 : 28] It's impossible. It's impossible. Impossible. And if you don't feel hopeless and helpless in front of Jesus, you haven't really heard what he's saying to you.

He's talking about the goodness you lack. And he's talking about the impossibility of entry. But finally, he's talking about the enormous cost.

The enormous cost. Look at how Peter hears this whole conversation. You've got to love Peter. Speaking for the rest of the 12, he speaks up in verse 28, and he says, Jesus, we've left everything for you.

And, you know, if you go back to the beginning of the gospel, Mark chapter 1, verse 17, Peter, Andrew, James, John, Jesus says to them, come follow me, and I'm going to send you out to fish for people.

And immediately, Peter and Andrew, they left their nets, and James and John, they left their father in the boat. And we've talked about this, that the gospels, you know, we learn that they come back, and they actually use their boats and their nets again.

[25 : 36] And they come back, and they get their father involved, and they talk to their parents again. But it's clear to them at that moment that their career and their nets, which give them meaning and purpose, and their father and their mother and their family that gives them identity and belonging, that all these things come second to Jesus.

That Jesus is their priority, that he's more important. They know in that moment when he says, come follow me, that following Jesus means handing over my life. All that I am and all that I have, so that my body, and my time, and the work of my hands, and my money, and all my relationships, that all of this is to be put at the disposal of Jesus for the purposes of Jesus.

And without this kind of renunciation, this renunciation of the self, discipleship is impossible. To follow Jesus requires renouncing everything.

Sometimes in practice, but always in principle. To follow Jesus means renouncing everything. Jesus asks no one else that I'm aware of to sell all that they have and give it to the poor, except for this guy.

But he does ask every single one of his disciples for a radical act of renunciation. And this is where we began. And Ash Wednesday, a few weeks ago, we talked about Mark chapter 8, where Jesus lays out the cost of discipleship.

[27 : 17] And he says in Mark 8, 34, whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

For what good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

I imagine this rich young ruler had been listening to Jesus. And he had heard those words, if you seek to save your life, you're going to lose it.

But he's thinking to himself, gosh, my possessions are my life. My life is my wealth. And if I lose that, then I lose myself.

And I don't want to lose it. I'm determined to save it. And so for him in this moment, the cost of discipleship is just too high. And so he turned away from Jesus and he went away sad.

[28 : 19] But Jesus also says, if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you'll save it. And that's why Jesus is raising his hand and speaking up in this moment.

He says, Lord, for this man it seems like eternal life and entry into the kingdom of God and salvation. It seems impossible for him. Is it impossible for us too?

Because we've left everything for you. Can you give us a little reassurance? And Jesus does.

He says, truly I tell you, in verse 29, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and for the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields.

What a picture of the church. Along with persecutions and in the age to come, eternal life. Now is Jesus saying that because, Peter, because you left everything to follow me, now your reward for this good work of yours is that you've merited eternal life.

[29 : 39] And that if this rich young ruler had sold all that he had and given it to the poor, he would have earned his entry into the kingdom of God. Is that what Jesus is saying? No.

Well, how, how, how is this thing that Jesus is so clear is impossible for human beings, how is it made possible by God?

And the only way it's possible to enter into the kingdom of God is for God to supernaturally intervene at enormous cost to himself.

That's the only way entry is possible. And so when Jesus looks at this rich young ruler and he loves him, Jesus, in his heart, must be thinking to himself, if only you knew who I am.

If only you knew that the person who's looking into your eyes right now and who's talking to you, if only you knew how rich I actually am.

[30 : 50] John chapter 1, verse 18, it says that from all eternity, Jesus has been in the bosom of the Father. He's been at the Father's right side.

He's been in closest relationship with this incomprehensible glory and wealth and love and joy and power of God. And Jesus is looking at this man, loving him, and saying, if only you knew how rich I really am.

And if only you knew that I left all of it for you. that I gave it all away to come find you. And that I sold all that I have so that I could give all of my riches away to poor sinners like you.

And this is what the Apostle Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians 8 when he says, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Oh! The one looking at you lovingly. Do you know who he is? He's eternal life embodied.

[32 : 08] He is the goodness of God incarnate. He is the kingdom of God in the flesh. He's salvation. He's the treasure of heaven in sandals.

And he's on his way into a poverty that's deeper than any of us could ever fathom on his cross. Why? In order to pay the enormous cost of entry into the kingdom of God on your behalf and on my behalf.

And so when he says deny yourself and follow me he's not asking us to do anything he hasn't already done.

He's saying to us friends I love you and I want you to belong. I want you to be included.

I want you to follow. I renounced all I had to get you. Won't you renounce all you have to get me?

[33 : 21] I'll close with these words from Matthew the gospel of Matthew chapter 13. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like treasure buried in a field that a man found and reburied and then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and he buys that field.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls and when he found that one priceless pearl he went and sold everything he had and bought it.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.