

Season of Pentecost Proper 23 – Year B
October 13, 2024
Pastor Jasper Sellnow



Theme: Followership made possible
Text: Mark 10:17-27

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. 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 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 someone who is rich 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.”

I’ve never understood the appeal of free climbing. No ropes. No nets. Just a man climbing a rock wall trusting his strength, his grip, and his wits. I can’t fathom being that confident in my own strength and abilities. All it would take is one mistake... one misplaced finger... one toe out of line... and down you’d go.

Today we are reminded by our Savior that this kind of thinking applied to our relationship with God is more than just risky... it’s deadly. If we put our hope of climbing to heaven into our own hands we’re doomed. No amount of training or resolve will allow us to make that climb. There’s only one way to heaven – total dependance on Jesus.

That’s the simple message that Jesus shared with his followers when a man approached him with a question. **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?”**

We’re not told much about this person except in verse 22 where we learn: **he had great wealth.**

In Luke's Gospel record of this account he gives the added detail that this man was a "ruler" – likely referring to his role as the ruler, or leader, of the local synagogue. This was what the Jewish people called their local churches. So this man was not only well off from a physical perspective, but he also would have seemed to most people to be well off spiritually. If anyone were close to God... if anyone was a shoe in for heaven... it was this guy. Spiritual. Faithful. A model citizen. If you asked people about him, they'd probably say, "he's a good man."

But that was part of the problem that Jesus had to address. This whole idea of what makes someone good. And so Jesus seizes on this man's addressing him as "**Good teacher**" and asks him a question meant to get him thinking: "**Why do you call me good?**" **Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."**

Jesus wanted this man to understand what he was actually saying by calling him "**Good teacher.**" There is no one on earth who is good. Not this rich young man. Not even Jesus *if* he is just a teacher... just another man. Only God is good. Let me repeat that: only God is good. God's Word clearly states this truth. In Romans St. Paul writes: "**There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.**" **Romans 3:10-12**

My point is, because of sin, God's Word makes it clear that no regular human being could ever be called "good" without any qualifications. Only God is truly good. But also, do take note, Jesus doesn't deny being good. He is, in fact, the only good man who ever lived. Because he is both true God and true man. But by asking this question, "**Why do you call me good?**" Jesus intended to have this man rethink his idea of who Jesus is... and what his idea should really be of a good man when he considered his own life.

And really his follow up comments are meant to carry this point forward. Jesus said: **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 mother.** In one sentence Jesus basically sums up the second part of the 10 Commandments, the ones that have to do with showing love to our neighbor. If you could keep those perfectly, you'd be well on your way to heaven. And that's just what this man thought. "**Teacher,**" **he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."**

And Jesus doesn't miss a beat. You notice he doesn't argue with him. He doesn't check him to ask about his motives and his thoughts and all the things that go unseen even if outwardly we keep such commands... instead Jesus aims right at the real problem in this man's heart. And he did it because he loved him. Mark writes: **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.**

Now it is tempting to read this account and think that the problem in this man's life... the problem Jesus wants us to consider too, is the problem of loving money too much. But this man's problem wasn't money... money was definitely a symptom... showing where the disease

of sin was taking root... But this was a heart issue. A heart that could not keep the first commandment. This man did not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. And his unwillingness to walk away from his wealth demonstrated that. He was not totally dependent on God. Instead, he held on to his money thinking that's what would give him pleasure, security, or worth that God couldn't give him. And this is, of course, a danger of earthly riches. Jesus says as much, saying: **“How hard it is for the rich 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.**

Camels don't fit through the eye of a needle. That's impossible. But so is getting to heaven on our own. And the people listening, Jesus disciples, they pick up on this asking: **“Who then can be saved?”** They got it. Jesus' point had sunk in. If this man who was a leader in his church... someone who'd worked hard to serve his neighbors... a man who was blessed by God with worldly wealth... a man who was even coming to Jesus for advice... if he can't be saved on his own merits, who can!?

And that's the point. If it is up to man to save himself, you're talking about doing something impossible. If you rely on your own riches you will fail. If you rely on your own goodness you will fail. If you rely on your family connections... your intellect... your church affiliation... if you rely on anyone or anything in this world you will fail. But remember Jesus doesn't end the lesson here. His disciples rightly ask **“Who then can be saved?”** But Jesus replied, **“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”**

And there it is. Jesus finishes up his master class on how to get to heaven... how to inherit eternal life. It's not about what we do. It's about what God does... it's about God doing the impossible for us. **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”** – that was the rich young man's question... but it was a flawed question. An inheritance is not something you earn by doing something. It's something you get because someone who loved you has died and is giving you the inheritance freely. And with Jesus, you have an inheritance that wipes out your record of sin and freely gives you eternal life, a gift that nothing in this world could buy, a gift that nothing you do could earn.

With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God. Jesus words are true. And his life demonstrates them to be true. Just think of it... A virgin birth? Impossible! But not with God. A sinless life lived in our place? Impossible! But not with God. A death that counts for everyone and removes the punishment of every sin? Impossible! But not with God. It's as if Jesus was the solo free climber. But instead of just climbing the impossible rock face to get into heaven by himself, he heaped all of humanity on his back... even as we fought him and despised him and scorned him all the way to the cross. **All things are possible with God.** From the impossible payment on the cross made possible by the blood of the sinless Son of God... to the impossible prison-break Jesus made on Easter Sunday from the bonds of death. No one is good, but God alone. And Jesus certainly fits that adjective “good” and that title “God” to a tee.

And what then is left for us to do to earn heaven? Nothing. Jesus did it all. He rescued us by his blood. He called us by the Spirit working in the gospel. He warmed your heart with his Word of

life. He washed your soul with water and the Word in baptism. He feeds your soul with the impossible made possible... Christ's body and blood hidden miraculously in bread and wine.

When you are tormented by the guilt of your sin... when you feel overwhelmed by life and focused on the wrong things in this life... remember the free gifts of God that have been given to you by Jesus. You stand secure eternally because your eternity does not depend on you. And so you can let go of the idols in your heart, whether they are riches, or family, or career, or health, or sinful vices... and instead, remembering what Christ has done for you, you can abandon yourself to the mercy of God. And in profound humility and deep-rooted joy hear Jesus call today to **“follow me”** - - and prompted by his Word and led by his Spirit you will find that followership is made possible by your Jesus... yes in faith you can follow the path he has walked... into the heaven that is already won.

When we try to depend on ourselves to make things right in this life or right with God... we'll find we're simply trying to do the impossible. But when we totally depend on Jesus – well, then we'll see the impossible made possible. Amen.