

Entering the Kingdom of God

October 10, 2021 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Mark 10:17-31

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.”

28 Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!”

29 “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 30 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. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

One of the questions that all of us ask, whether we really want to admit it or not, is, “What happens after I die?” Is this life I am living now really all there is? And, if not, what happens next? And if there is a choice in the place where you are supposed to go, what do I have to do to get to the good place? There was even a sitcom called “The Good Place” starring Kristen Bell and Ted Danson, which ran from 2016 to 2020, that poked fun at this very question of where do we go after we die. Not exactly theologically sound but it did get nominated for a number of Emmy awards. So, we at least know that it is the general public, and not just those of the Christian tradition, who are inquisitive about life after death.

This morning we will explore a little more this well-known narrative from Scripture where a man approaches Jesus about what he must do to inherit eternal life. Now, I have read commentaries that point fingers of accusation at this young man, claiming that he was arrogant and selfish. But that is not how I read this text. A proud man would not have run to catch up with Jesus. An arrogant man would not have fallen on his knees before Jesus, like this man did. He was a wealthy man, who was likely wearing expensive clothes, but he did not mind kneeling in the dirt before Jesus. No, I think this man was very sincere in his question. We read later that when this wealthy young man responded to Jesus, Jesus looked hard at him and loved him (v. 21).

The way I read it, Jesus did not take issue with the rich young man as a person. Jesus took issue with what the rich young man said. And it was not so much what he said, but the way he phrased his request, that indicated that he did not fully understand what he was asking. The man asked, “Good teacher, ...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 17) Notice that Jesus did not even address the question at first. He addressed the title that the rich young man had given him. Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? ...No one is good—except God alone.” (v. 18) Jesus was not denying he was good. He wanted the rich young man to draw the conclusion that he could not refer to Jesus as “good” unless he also acknowledged Jesus as God.

Then Jesus listed off, and not in any particular order, the last six commandments of the Ten Commandments, because those six deal with love for one’s neighbor (v. 19):

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.”

“Teacher,” the young man declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” (v. 20)

The young man replied that he had kept all the commandments since his *youth* (from age twelve when a boy entered manhood and became responsible to keep the commandments). The man sincerely believed that he had not broken any commandments¹

This is pretty amazing when you think about it. Who among us could say we have not broken any commandments since we were young? If I claimed to have not broken any commandments since I was young, then I would have broken yet another one by bearing false witness to you. I am a sinner, plain and simple, and it is beyond my personal abilities to refrain from sinning. Yet, that may be the very point Jesus was trying to get at with this rich young man. If you don't think you are a sinner, then you think you don't need a Savior. And without Jesus as your Savior, you are not going to be able to experience eternal life with God. You see, this man thought he was good, which is likely why Jesus started out by defining what it means to be "good."

Jesus knew that this young man's belief that he was without sin was at the very root of his inability to accept his need for a Savior. You see, when the young man asked Jesus his question, he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (emphasis mine) The young man thought he had to do something to get eternal life, that it was all about his ability to achieve it somehow. It may be that he inherited his wealth. So, now, what must he do to inherit eternal life? He was looking at a spiritual matter through the eyes of a personal transaction. And, as far as salvation is concerned, trying to earn our way into eternal life is just not going to cut it. This young man had the right idea but was coming at it from the wrong angle. Jesus can see into a person's heart. He knew what the man's motive was behind his question. And Scripture tells us, Jesus looked at him and loved him (v. 21).

Then Jesus gives the man a proposition: "One thing you lack," Jesus 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 (v. 22). Again, a lot of commentators point fingers of accusation at this rich young man, claiming that he just did not have faith enough to follow Jesus. But I think that misses the point. Let me ask you, you may not consider yourself rich so that you wouldn't have as much to lose as this young man, but if Jesus told you to go sell everything you have and give it to the poor, would you do it? How many here would do that? If you would, I would like to meet with you in my office after the worship service, because, wow, do I have some opportunities for you. Just kidding. I think.

Some commentators have pointed fingers at Jesus wondering why he would have asked of this young man such an impossible demand. An impossible demand? Well, there, I think that is just the point. I believe Jesus was waiting for the young man to admit that being able to "do" all that might be required of him to do in order to earn eternal life was impossible. The reason I believe that is because Jesus said as much himself later in this reading: "With man it is impossible, but not with God, all things are possible with God" (v. 27). Once you realize that trying to inherit salvation, earning your

¹ Barton, B. B. (1994). [Mark](#) (p. 290). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

way into heaven, attempting to influence God by listing all the commandments you have kept, is not going to cut it. The only way to salvation is through accepting Jesus as your Savior.

People who are grasping onto something else for their salvation are grasping at straws. One of the biggest little “g” gods that people have in their lives today is wealth. As long as they have wealth and well-being, many people believe they do not need God. They believe they don’t need God, because they think they can rely on themselves and their riches for their own salvation. Jesus said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (v. 23) Jesus didn’t say it was impossible; he said it was hard.

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.” (vv. 24-25) There has been the legend that Jesus was referring to the needle gate in the temple of Jerusalem and that a camel could not fit through the gate if it was burdened with material goods.

“The Greek word refers to a needle that is used with thread, and the Needle’s Eye Gate didn’t exist in Jesus’ day. It was put in later when the city was rebuilt.²

Jesus purposefully wanted to point out how impossible it was for someone to enter the kingdom of God on their own. The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” (v. 26)

That’s when Jesus looked at them and said, “Humanly speaking this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” All the disciples were puzzled but it was good old “speak first, think about it later” Peter who spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!” (v. 28) Peter still wasn’t getting it. He thought it was all about him. Look at all the things he had done. Look at all the things he had left behind to follow Jesus. As in, the rich young man may not have been willing to leave everything to follow Jesus, but we, the disciples, did! Didn’t all that count for something? Peter may have been wondering if even he was going to receive eternal life.

Jesus reassured them all: “Truly I tell you, ...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. (vv. 29-30)

Indeed, there will be hardships following Jesus. People will persecute us, make fun of us, and perhaps simply ignore us as being irrelevant. But there are many blessings in this life as well. We know that no matter what happens to us in this life, Jesus is always with us. He is alive and he walks with us through our darkest valleys. Jesus gives us hope when we think no hope is possible. And he reminds us that if hope is based on what we can do then hope is just not possible, but with God, all things are possible.

² Barton, B. B. (1994). [Mark](#) (p. 295). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

And, not only do we have blessings in this life, we have the promise of everlasting life in the age to come. It is a promise that is made possible, not because of what we could do to inherit eternal life, but by what Christ has already done for us by going to the cross to save us from our sins. It is only through his gracious gift that we are saved. Amen.