

Mark 10:17-27 As Jesus was setting out on a journey, one man ran up to him and knelt in front of him. He asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God. ¹⁹You 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.’” ²⁰The man replied, “Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child.” ²¹Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he looked sad and went away grieving, because he had great wealth. ²³Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus told them again, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in their riches 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.” ²⁶They were even more astonished and said to one another, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For people, it is impossible, but not for God, because all things are possible for God.”

There are some questions in the Bible that are surprising. One that always comes to mind is when a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to speak to Jesus secretly. He showed that he really didn’t understand the first thing about how God brings people to faith. Jesus even had to say to him, “**You are the teacher of Israel and you do not know these things?**” Thankfully it seems that his meeting with Jesus had a positive effect on him. He helped Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus’ body from the cross and place it in a tomb.

I remember one summer we were doing some canvassing around town. We asked people if they had a church home and, if so, how often they attended. We also asked them, “What is one thing that you would like to know more about from the Bible?” We got some interesting answers. One was from the pastor of another denomination. He asked, “How do you make the Bible relevant in today’s society?” It makes you wonder if he understood any better than Nicodemus had.

In this text a man comes up to Jesus and asks a question that he should have already known the answer to. Really, he didn’t have any clue. Thankfully he came to the man who is the answer to that question. As we study this text we will ask ourselves a question too, one that we should know the answer to. As long as we live, we need to keep asking ourselves What’s More Important: your wealth or your God?

In this text we meet someone who is simply called “**one man.**” We get more details from Matthew and Luke’s Gospels. Luke tells us that he was a synagogue ruler. He made sure that the weekly worship services were conducted properly. Today we might call him a congregational president. Matthew tells us that he was young. That Greek word indicates that he was probably somewhere in his 30s. Later on in this text we also learn that he was quite wealthy.

It also seems that he had a healthy respect for Jesus. Mark tells us that he “**ran up to him and knelt in front of him. He asked, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’**” Even though he was a man of some importance, he humbled himself before Jesus. He called him “**Good teacher**” which showed that he respected Jesus as someone whose opinions were worth listening to.

So far, so good, right? This sounds like the kind of guy that you would want your son to be like and your daughter to marry. He was faithful, trustworthy, and made a good living. What’s not to like? Well, he still had a problem. From the rest of this text it’s clear that he had been taught by the Pharisees. They taught that God’s Law was the way to make yourself right with God, but no matter how faithful he was, he had this sneaking suspicion that something wasn’t right. So he turned to Jesus for an answer.

There are people like this all over our planet today. That’s the way the human mind naturally thinks. There is something I must do if I want to be right with God or if I want to be a good person or if I want to get ahead in this life. Just try hard! You can do it! It’s the American way, right? The problem with that idea—well, one problem anyway—is that you can never be sure. Have I done enough? What else could I be doing?

Jesus’ first reply to this man seems odd, “**Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God.**” As a matter of fact some people have quoted that passage as “proof” that Jesus isn’t true God. That’s not what he’s saying. He’s actually saying the exact opposite. He’s basically telling this man, “You don’t know how close you are to the truth. I’m going to show you that what you do doesn’t matter. You need what I will do.”

So Jesus begins to use the Law properly. He says, “¹⁹**You know the commandments.**” None of this should have been a surprise to a man who was a synagogue ruler. Notice that Jesus quotes all the commandments of the second table of the Law: commandments four through ten. All of those deal with our

relationship with our neighbor. God wants us to live in Christian love for all the people around us. Those commandments show us some specific ways that we can do that.

He specifically didn't quote commandments one through three: you shall have no other gods, you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, and remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Jesus did that deliberately because that's where the main problem was lying. This man's heart was not completely devoted to his God. Now Jesus proved it, **"One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."**

So is Jesus trying to teach us that to really be believers we must sell all of our possessions and take a vow of poverty? Mark tells us that Jesus said this because he loved him. This man had been led astray by the Pharisees. Like the rest of the people in Israel at that time, he was like a sheep without a shepherd. He thought that he had kept God's Law perfectly. He wasn't even close. Jesus was properly using the Law to show him the sin he was overlooking.

We have examples of many faithful people in the Bible who were rich. We think of the patriarchs like Abraham and Job. King David certainly was very wealthy. In the New Testament we hear about people like Joseph of Arimathea. Even though they had wealth their heart was not on their wealth. They weren't defined by it. They trusted in the God who promised to send the Savior.

In a way, though, God does command us to give everything, right? After all, it's all his to begin with. God commands us to provide for our families, to pay our taxes, to help out those who are less fortunate, and to respond to his love for us with our offerings. So by doing those things we are showing that God is most important in our lives. When we show love for the people around us, we are showing love for God.

Sadly, this man did not take the news terribly well, **"²²When he heard this, he looked sad and went away grieving, because he had great wealth."** He thought he had done everything right. Now Jesus had shown him that he had not even begun to obey the Law properly. For the first time in this man's life, God's Law showed him his sin clearly. That hit like a ton of bricks.

That's why we don't like hearing God's Law. People get very upset when we talk about the budget or reviewing our offerings. "All the church wants is your money!" God's not going to let you off the hook that easily. God doesn't just want your money. He wants you. He wants your heart. If he doesn't have your heart, he doesn't want your money either. You cannot live for your money and live for your God at the same time.

What's More Important: your wealth or your God?

Jesus turned to his disciples and said something to them that must have hit them like a ton of bricks, **"How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!"** In case they didn't catch it the first time he said, **"Children, how hard it is for those who trust in their riches 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."**

I've heard people say that the eye of a needle is a reference to a very small gate in Jerusalem. The only way you could get a camel through was to unload what it was carrying and force it to its knees. There is no evidence of such a door existing. Plus Jesus' point is not to say that it is challenging for the rich to get into heaven on their own, but that it is impossible for them to.

This absolutely shocked the disciples. Back then if you were wealthy people believed that you had been specially blessed by God. If you were poor or were born with some kind of birth defect, people believed you had been specially punished by God. It is true that all of our earthly possessions are gifts from God to us and we thank them for him, but having a lot doesn't mean that a person is closer to God. Also if you have problems, that doesn't mean that God is punishing you or shunning you.

Think about it this way. What is more challenging: to have a little or to have a lot? Many people would think having too little would be harder. I disagree. If you don't have much, you don't have much to manage. One of the complaints that I hear from people when we talk about offerings is, "I'm on a fixed income." Congratulations. Most people are. That makes it easier to manage things because your financial situation doesn't change much from month to month. If you're a farmer, that's a different story.

When my kids were little, I didn't have to live in fear of someone kidnapping one of them and holding them for ransom. People knew we were living hand to mouth. Billionaires might actually have to think about that. Plenty of celebrities need to bring security with them. I don't. A fancy sports car might be a target for thieves. A Hyundai with just shy of 180,000 miles on it? Not so much.

Don't read this text and say, "Boy, Jesus, you really told them." These words aren't addressed to other people. He's looking at us. You might not think you are rich, but compared to the rest of the world, you are.

Jesus is calling on all of us to take a close look at our hearts. Who is more important to us? Is it our God or is it our stuff? It's so easy to get caught up in our blessings that we forget about the one who blessed us.

Jesus' words had the impact that he wanted them to have. The disciples exclaimed, "**Who then can be saved?**" Aha! God's Law has done its job. If what Jesus says is true, then we are doomed. And what he says is true. God's Law is not intended to make us feel good about ourselves. It is designed to grab us by the scruff of the neck and hold us over the mouth of Hell itself.

Jesus answered their question, "**For people, it is impossible.**" He had just shown the particular struggles that wealthy people might have, but now he shows that every human being is in the exact same boat. All the money in the world wouldn't pay for a single sin of ours, much less all of them. We can try to obey God's Law, but God doesn't tell us to try. He says, "**Be perfect.**" Perfection is one thing we cannot offer him.

Thankfully Jesus didn't end his sentence there. "**For people, it is impossible, but not for God, because all things are possible for God.**" The proof of that is the one speaking to them. God himself has done the impossible and become a mortal human being. He was going to fulfill every one of the prophecies that the Holy Spirit had sprinkled throughout the Old Testament.

God did the impossible by remaining perfect and holy while at the same time providing perfection and holiness to a world full of people who can't have it any other way. He made Jesus our Substitute. We can't give God perfection, but Jesus could and Jesus did in our place. We didn't want to suffer Hell. God didn't want that either. So Jesus was willing to suffer Hell for us when he died on the cross.

Let's go back to that young man's question, "**Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**" The answer is nothing. We don't have to do anything to earn what God offers to the whole world as a free gift. If I thought my salvation depended on me in any way, shape, or form, I'd have to waste everyday worrying if I had done enough and I could never be sure. But since my salvation depends on Jesus alone, I don't have anything to worry about.

God didn't want to keep this a secret so he had books of the Bible, like this one, recorded for us so that we would know everything that Jesus has done for us. That way we don't have to waste our lives focusing on wealth, which is here today and gone tomorrow. We can focus on our Savior who lasts forever. He gave us Holy Baptism and Holy Communion so that we can see his great love for us with our own eyes. God did the impossible for you because he loves you that much.

What's More Important: your wealth or your God? I often wonder what happened to the young synagogue ruler in this text. I hope he didn't remain sad forever. Perhaps later he came to understand that all he needed was Jesus in the first place. By God's grace we know the answer. What do we do to inherit eternal life? Nothing, because Jesus did it all for us.