

“Jesus does the impossible”

1. Sinners can't keep the law
2. Jesus kept the law for sinners

<sup>17</sup> 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?”

<sup>18</sup> “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You 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.’”

<sup>20</sup> “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

<sup>21</sup> 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.” <sup>22</sup> At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

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

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It was Game 1 of the 1988 World Series. The LA Dodgers were the underdogs, and they were down to their final out, trailing the Oakland A's 4-3. They had played the whole game without their best player, Kirk Gibson. He was pretty banged up—he had an injured left hamstring *and* a sore right knee. But with two outs in the ninth inning and a runner on first base, Gibson entered the game to pinch hit. He fouled off the first two pitches, looking like he might collapse at any minute. But six pitches later, Gibson hit a line drive into right field that sailed over the fence and into the stands. He limped his way around the bases and pumped his fist. Against all odds, the Dodgers had won the game. And then came the famous words from the announcer: “The impossible has happened.”

In our sermon text for today, Jesus teaches *us* about something that's impossible. It's a bit of an unusual story, and its interesting right from the beginning, as the Bible tells us that a young man ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before him. The same story in Luke's gospel tells us that this man was a synagogue ruler, someone who would have been well respected among the Jewish people. But he falls on his knees in humility before Jesus to ask him this very important question. He says, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus then answers his question with a question. He says, “Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.” So what's Jesus saying? Is he denying that he's God? Unfortunately, there are plenty of people who read this verse and come to that conclusion. They say, “Look, he says it himself right here. Jesus isn't God.” But that's really the exact opposite of what Jesus is saying. He isn't denying his status as God here—he's emphasizing it. He's asking the young man to really consider who it is he's speaking to. Jesus is saying, “You're calling me good? Isn't that something you'd only say about God? You do realize who it is you're talking to, don't you?”

We do have to admit, though, that Jesus' response might catch us a little bit off guard. We might have expected him to answer this man the way he answered another synagogue ruler named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was that Pharisee who came to speak to Jesus at night so that the other Pharisees wouldn't know about it, and Jesus spoke to Nicodemus the most famous words in the whole Bible: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” So, why didn't Jesus say something like that to this rich young man? Or maybe we'd expect Jesus to answer like Paul answered the jailer at Philippi. The jailer was terrified. He had fallen asleep on the job, and God had opened the doors of the prison. The jailer thought all the prisoners had escaped, and he thought he was going to be put to death. So out of desperation, he asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” And Paul simply told him, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” Both Jesus' and

Paul's answers are wonderful, gospel-filled responses. Hopefully we would say something similar if someone asked *us* about how to get to heaven. But *neither* of these responses sound anything like what Jesus says to this young ruler. Instead, Jesus tells him, "You know the commandments." And then he lists some of them off—"Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother." So, why does Jesus answer this man with the law instead of the gospel? It's a fair question, but I think the answer to that question can be seen pretty clearly through the young ruler's response.

He says, "Teacher, all these I've kept since I was a boy." This man thought that he had kept God's law perfectly. When he asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he wasn't asking the question from a humble heart or a terrified conscience like Nicodemus or that jailer. No, this man thought that he could earn his way into heaven. But he had the sense that he hadn't *quite* done enough yet, and he wanted Jesus to fill him in on what it was that he could do get over the hump. Now think about Jesus' initial statement again; right away he had told this young ruler, "No one is good but God alone." No one! And yet the man still missed it. He still thought he could be good enough to earn himself eternal life.

Now that we've established what the young man was really asking, we come to the point in the story where the gospel writer includes a pretty important detail. Mark writes, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." Now remember that verse as you listen to what Jesus says next. He says, "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." Those sure seem like some pretty harsh words from Jesus. After hearing that, it's not all that surprising to read that the man went away sad. But remember—Jesus looked at him and loved him. I could see how this might seem a little confusing; Jesus took a person who was excited to ask him about heaven and sent him away feeling rejected. Where's the love in that picture? But I think this is one of those places in the Bible where we just have to thank God for including for us the little details that we need to understand. If it wasn't for that one sentence, I think I'd have some questions. But because of that one little detail—"Jesus loved him"—we have such a better grasp on why Jesus says what he says. This young man was full of self-righteous notions of how he could get to heaven, and Jesus knew that instead of getting him to heaven, those beliefs had this man on the road to hell. So Jesus pricked his conscience right where he knew it would do the most damage, right where it would cause him to realize that he was a sinner who needed a savior. Jesus told him to give up his wealth. And despite all the good that this man had probably done in his life, that was one thing that he just wasn't willing to do. And so we

hear the sad story of someone who was invited directly by Jesus to come follow him, but refused because he loved the things of this world instead.

Can you see where the rich young ruler was coming from? Doesn't it sometimes seem like it would be easier to be a Christian if God would just give us a checklist of spiritual chores, that once we check them all off the list, we know we're alright before God? But instead, God says, "Be holy, as I, the LORD your God, am holy." And we hear that and we feel kind of like the rich young ruler when Jesus tells him to give away all his possessions. We stand before God and we say, "I know I can't do that. I'm a sinner." So when Jesus says to the disciples, "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 a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," we're right there with the disciples when they ask, "Who then can be saved?"

This "camel through the eye of a needle" statement by Jesus is one that gets an awful lot of attention from scholars and experts of the Bible. But despite all the focus on it, it might be one of the most misunderstood passages in the whole Bible. And the reason it's misunderstood is because it's hard to accept what Jesus says here. You're telling me it's harder for a rich man to go to heaven than for an enormous camel to pass through the teeny tiny eye of a needle? *Really?* No, that can't be right. So then you get all sorts of theories about the *right* way to understand this passage. Maybe Jesus was talking about an opening in the wall of Jerusalem that people called "The Eye of the Needle" because it was so hard, but not quite impossible, for a camel to get through. Or other people have pointed out that the word Jesus uses for "camel" is really similar, just one letter different, from the word for "cable" or "rope," so maybe Jesus actually said that. But, the last time I checked, a cable still doesn't fit through the eye of a needle any better than a camel does. We're completely missing the point if we see these words from Jesus as anything other than a description of something that is absolutely impossible.

I remember reading this story as a little kid and thinking, "Well I'm not rich, so Jesus isn't talking about me. Guess I don't really need to listen to this Bible story." We know that the disciples didn't always get it right, but thankfully they didn't make the same mistake that I did. Most of them were fishermen. One or two of them *might* have been a little bit wealthy, but as a group they were probably closer to poor than rich. But they didn't hear what Jesus said and say, "Well, that's too bad for that rich man, but at least he's not talking about us!" No, the disciples understood that it's not just impossible for someone struggling with greed or materialism to get into heaven—it's impossible for *any* sinner to get into heaven! And this is why I love the disciples; they ask Jesus the questions that I think I would've wanted to ask, too. They say, "Jesus, who then can be saved?"

Jesus gives them the answer in verse 27 of our text: “Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” That’s how we know what Jesus meant about the camel going through the eye of the needle. He tells us right here—“*This is impossible.*” If you’re asking the same question as the rich man, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the answer Jesus gives is “Do the impossible.”

Maybe our sin isn’t exactly like the rich man’s. I’m not sure that too many people in our society today really think that they can be perfect. But I do think that most people think they can be good *enough*. Being a “good person” is something that 2021 America values more than almost anything else. It seems like we hear that all the time—“so-and-so is a good person, so-and-so is a bad person.” But what does that even mean? Good by whose standards? Doing “good” most of the time—whatever makes you “good” in the world’s eyes—it’s worthless when it comes to being good before God. Jesus couldn’t have said it more clearly. “No one is good, except God alone.” It’s a message that we believe as Christians, and it’s a message that is shocking and foolish to the world, because there’s a part of us as human beings that thinks that our best *has* to be worth *something* to God. But the Bible is very clear on this subject. James 2:10 says that anyone who keeps the whole law and stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. There is only one who is good, and that one is Jesus. He loved and honored God above all things. He obeyed the earthly authorities. He *always* thought and acted out of love. He never lied or lusted or stole or gossiped or envied. That’s what it takes to be good before God. And that’s what Jesus did, perfectly, for his entire life.

It was the very first thing Jesus said to the rich young man: “Why do you call me good when only God is good?” That’s come full circle now as Jesus tells his disciples, and you and me, the real answer to the young man’s question. What must we do to inherit eternal life? It’s impossible for us. But not for God. Not for the one who is good. Not for our Savior Jesus. Just a little while after this exchange with the rich young man, Jesus would go into Jerusalem, where he would be accused of crimes and sins that no one could prove. Jesus is that one who is good. But he would pay the penalty of all of us who are not good, all of us who have broken God’s law. It was impossible for sinners to be saved on their own, so God intervened. Jesus gave us his righteousness, his holiness, his goodness, and in the most unfair trade of all time, he took on our sin in return. So now, when God looks at us, he doesn’t see the filthy, dirty rags of our sin, but only Jesus’ pure and perfect righteousness. Something that was absolutely impossible for us to have on our own was freely given to us by Jesus.

We love to overuse the word “impossible.” Kirk Gibson’s home run in 1988 sure seemed impossible. In fact, it was so unlikely that it’s gone down as one of the most famous, iconic moments in the history of American sports. But in the end, it was just a really good baseball player hitting a home run, which seems pretty possible to me. We might say that it’s impossible to stay in shape, or it’s impossible to get all of our work done, or it’s impossible to fix a broken relationship. But when it comes down to it, none of those things are actually impossible. But what Jesus described to the rich young man really was. For you or me to make ourselves right with God, it’s like trying to fit a camel through the eye of a needle. But our substitute wasn’t just a pinch hitter in the bottom of the ninth inning. It was God himself who became a man for us. Jesus kept God’s law for us and gave us his righteousness. It’s no exaggeration for us to say that the impossible has happened. Sinners saved by God’s grace have been given eternal life. Thank God that we have a Savior who did the impossible for us. Amen.