

WITH MAN IT IS IMPOSSIBLE

MARK 10:17-31

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is continuing to reveal his mission as the Christ and his commission for those who desire to be his followers. He has delivered the call to radical self-denial (8:34) which is a call that has been confirmed by God in his command from the cloud to "Listen to [His Son]" (9:7). As Jesus continues on the way to fulfilling his mission, his teaching is becoming increasingly specific in regards to this call to self-denial. And here in this encounter with the rich young man, Jesus reveals how radical discipleship is not an additional obligation in life, but rather a call that replaces and overshadows all other obligations and allegiances in your life.

Many people have attempted to approach this particular passage as if this is strictly a lesson on money and a warning against great wealth. However, upon examining this encounter with careful consideration we observe that this is not merely a lesson for those with money. This is a message about entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Over and over again throughout Scripture we come to understand (and for the most part accept) that things like sexual immorality, idolatry, jealousy, anger, envy, and drunkenness are evil in the eyes of God, and that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21). However, in this particular encounter with the rich young ruler, we have the exact opposite scenario. While unrighteousness and badness excludes us from entering into the Kingdom of God, the point being revealed here in this passage is that even our goodness is not enough. Badness will keep us out, but goodness won't get us in.

How often do we assume that we know what it's going to take to enter into heaven? How often do we assume that we've got what it takes to enter the Kingdom of God? Do we make assumptions based on our own goodness that we will escape the judgement of God? Do we make assumptions based on God's kindness to us without realizing that his kindness is meant to lead us to repentance?¹

¹ see Romans 2:3-5

This is a story on entering the Kingdom of God. And through this encounter with the rich young man, Jesus reveals how radical discipleship is not an addition to your life, but rather a substitution of your life. Here in this story, we see an interested man receive an impossible call that reveals the incredible love that makes the impossible possible.

An Interested Man

Jesus and his disciples are packed up and getting ready to head out of town when all of a sudden this young man comes running up to them desperately wanting to talk with Jesus. It's an interesting scene because most people who approached Jesus in this manner were either really sick, possessed by some sort of demon, or a serious sinner looking for grace and forgiveness. However, this young man seemed to have it all together, and yet something was still bothering him to the point that he was hoping Jesus could help him out.

In observing the descriptions of this man given in Matthew, Mark and Luke, we can safely assume that this young man was smart and successful. He was a successful businessman of some sort who had achieved an elevated level of status and power within the community. He was a passionate young man who was driven to excel in life and who had devoted himself to respectable moral character. He took religion very seriously and was therefore an all around good and decent young man.

For us today, we'd be foolish to overlook the fact that this young man was in every practical sense the ideal American Christian man. This is the type of man that you might want your daughter to marry. Even the disciples were shocked after this man's encounter with Jesus. They said, "If not this man then who can be saved? If this man isn't getting in then what hope does anyone else have of getting into the kingdom?"

This rich young ruler runs up to Jesus and kneels before him to ask him a question. He asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Up to this point in his ministry, no one has asked such a sincere question of such a serious magnitude. The nature of this question reveals even more about the rich young man, and the condition of his heart that has led him to approach Jesus in this manner.

We can make three more observations about this young man through the sincerity and seriousness of his question:

He recognized a need. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to man's approach towards Christ is man's failure to recognize his need for Christ. This man recognized that despite having everything; he was still missing something.

He responded with urgency, eagerness and concern. Unlike many religious zealots that Jesus had encountered, this man was sincere in his question. He wasn't trying to trap Jesus or confront his teaching. This man had more than likely heard Jesus teach before and was legitimately concerned that he was still missing something. He was truly seeking an honest answer.

He respected Jesus as someone who was willing and able to meet his need. He ran to Jesus which was culturally out of character for a man and especially a man of great wealth and status. And not only did he run to Jesus, but he knelt before him in seeking his help. The young man not once attempted to use his status or position in society as a means to demand some sort of help from Jesus. And we must remember that in his Incarnation, Jesus was a man of no reputation, no monetary wealth and no elevated status of accomplishment within the community, and yet this young man who is extremely successful possesses the awareness and the humility to still show a great deal of respect in kneeling before Jesus.

So the young man sensed a need and sought an answer. Have we ever felt this need?

He falls at the feet of Jesus and humbly asks him one simple question. "Good Teacher, what do I still lack? I'm doing it, but I still feel like I'm missing it. What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

How might we answer that question? We might expect Jesus to say something like this, "Just put your trust in me as your Lord and Savior, and you'll be saved." But Jesus gives him a different answer. Jesus gives this interested man an impossible call.

An Impossible Call

The rich young man wants to know what he can *DO* to enter into the Kingdom of God. This man's whole life has been about doing, and he has obviously done well in everything he's set out to do. However, in all his *doing*, this man is still unsettled and unsatisfied about his soul, and so he wants to find out what else he must add to his goals and to-do list in order to ultimately find peace and security concerning his salvation.

The great misconception of all religion is that we must do something in order to inherit eternal life. Like this young man, we look for assurance of our salvation and eternal security, but we wrongly assume assurance can only be found in what we can obtain and accomplish in and of ourselves.

And so in his response to the man's sincerity, Jesus actually gives this man something else to do. After drawing attention to the man's moral resume, Jesus says to the man, "You lack one thing: Go and give away everything you own. Then come follow me. And then, you will be saved."

The man had just pointed out, "I've kept these commandments that you've mentioned. I've done these things. I've never killed anybody, harmed anybody. I don't steal or cheat anybody out of anything. I'm faithful to my wife and helpful to those in need. I'm an honest man who's earned an honest living for myself. I'm an upstanding citizen, and I'm sincere and serious about my devotion to God."

At that point, the man was probably hoping to hear some sort of affirmation from Jesus, but instead, he gets something that he certainly wasn't expecting. And if we're honest with ourselves, we look at what Jesus says here to this young man, and we begin to write it off as a little too dramatic and little too radical to be taken too seriously. It's at this point that many of us will begin to look for the "hidden meaning" of the message rather than just admitting that Jesus wasn't messing around with this young man.

And we must not ignore the fact that this young man realized exactly what Jesus was saying. He doesn't challenge what Jesus has just said, and he offers no excuses in return. The rich young man simply hears the hard truth of what Jesus has just said to him, and then he walks away from Jesus completely heartbroken (literally 'grieved to the point of depression').

Remember the radical call given by Jesus just two chapters earlier, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

For the rich young ruler, this is simply too much, too difficult, too inconvenient and too uncomfortable. He can't do it. Indeed, he won't do it. He was hoping to *add to* what he had going for him, but Christ has called him to *turn from* what he's got going for him. So now he's off to form his own way in life, but he'll do so disheartened and with constant unrest. There are few things more sorrowful than watching someone turn from the plain truth of Christ standing right before them.

Jesus has just exposed this young man's heart, and for the first time in his life, he realizes that he is more devoted to his religion and his resources than he is to his God.

Jesus gives the man a clear and decisive choice to make: "Do you want me or do you want your wealth?" And as we see this young man walk away in sorrow, we see the overwhelming control wealth can have over those of us who have an abundance of it.

James Edwards writes:

"How profoundly ironic is the kingdom of God. The children in the former story who possess nothing are not told that they lack anything, but rather the kingdom of God is theirs; yet this man who possesses everything still lacks something!... Jesus offers himself as a substitute for the man's possessions."²

What if Jesus called you to give away everything you own? How might you respond? Would you respond in obedience? And if you're unsure of how you might respond then what might this reveal about your love for him?

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 312.

And you see, that's the problem. Jesus is not out to get our money; he's on a mission to capture our hearts. Jesus never implies that it's a sin to be rich. Jesus doesn't imply that poor people are better than rich people. Jesus is not even teaching a lesson on greed versus generosity here in this passage. Jesus is simply saying that it's impossible to enter the Kingdom of God when we are clinging to anything else other than him.

And that's exactly what he's saying here to the rich young man, "You want to go to heaven? Well, the only way to do that is to put all your hope and trust in me, and the only way that you're going to do that is to sacrifice all the stuff you're trusting in now."

Whatever it is that you value most in your life; whatever it is that you just can't consider letting go, that is the thing that has your heart, and that may be the very thing blocking your entrance into the Kingdom of God.

As this young man walks away, Jesus tells his disciples:

"Children, how difficult it is to enter the Kingdom of God!... With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

An Incredible Love

The disciples watch this young man walk away in sorrow, and they're amazed at the words of Jesus. They are exceedingly more astonished at this impossible call than even the rich young ruler was.

What Jesus has just asked this man to do seems to surpass all human possibility. It now forces the disciples to examine themselves and discover their own need and inadequacy. They too are now confronted with the hard truth about what they lack, and this leads them to ask Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" And at last, the disciples have asked the right question.

"What must I do?" implies a sense of self-sufficiency, but "Who can be saved?" implies desperate need and a sense of total dependency.

Now, in studying this encounter we might notice that Mark mentions that Jesus “loved” this man (10:21). Of course, we also might acknowledge that Jesus loved anyone and everyone that he encountered, but there’s something different about this. This particular statement about Jesus’ love towards a specific person is extremely rare in the gospel narratives. In fact, nowhere else in Mark’s account does Mark say that “Jesus loved ____.” So why would he make sure to mention this here in this story? Why go out of your way to make that point?

Well, perhaps at this point in Jesus’ life, he too is a young man of similar age to this young man that had just approached him so earnestly. And like this man, Jesus too has experienced what it’s like to have an elevated status and an enormous amount of wealth.

Jesus is the eternal Son of God and has lived in infinite and incomprehensible glory, wealth, joy, love and honor as the Second Person of the Trinity of God. You see, like this young man in front of him, Jesus too is a rich young ruler, but unlike this man Jesus is *the* Rich Young Ruler. Jesus is the One who has gone and sold everything that he had in order that we who are poor might truly be rich.³

Jesus had equal status with God. Jesus was God. But he didn’t cling to his status as God. Instead, he freely gave up his privileges of being God and took on the status of a servant becoming a man just like you and me. And not only did God become a man, but he then suffered and died in order to give his life as a ransom for many granting the incredible gift of eternal life to those who would place their faith in him.

You see, Jesus knew all too well what it was like to give up everything you have for the benefit of someone else.⁴ So Jesus knew that what he was asking this young man to do was difficult, but Jesus was also not asking this man (or us) to do anything that he hasn’t done already.

Jesus gives this interested man the impossible call, but only because he has offered all men the incredible love that makes the impossible possible.

³ see 2 Corinthians 8:9

⁴ see Philippians 2:6-8

Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

Salvation is solely a supernatural work of God. Man must trade in his systems of self-sufficiency and trust in the all-sufficiency of God as his only hope for salvation and true security in life.

The young man didn't recognize that his need was greater than he had expected. He was concerned. He was interested. But he wasn't desperate to the point of total dependence on the truth of the only Way to enter into the Kingdom of God.

The young man didn't recognize that Jesus is greater than he had anticipated. He admired and respected Jesus, but he didn't acknowledge or recognize the truth about Jesus. The young man had called him "Good Teacher", and Jesus had responded, "Why do you call me good? Do you know what you're saying? There is only one opinion that matters and that is the opinion of the only One who is truly good. God's opinion alone is what matters and God alone is good, and yet you've called me good? Am I or am I not the One who is truly good?" The young man respected Jesus but did not fear him as God and the Lord over all things – including his hope of eternal life.

And the young man didn't recognize that heaven will be greater than he ever imagined. This man assumed that he would *add* to the abundant life that he was currently experiencing without realizing that he would need to *turn from* what he had now for something that would prove itself to be infinitely greater in the end.

Life in Christ is not merely a sacrifice; it's an investment. And the return is infinitely greater than we could ever imagine.

In the words of the apostle Paul:

"No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Only in the call of Christ do we find the salvation, security and strength we need to set our hearts upon God rather than on what we might own. What are we hanging on to that might end up costing us our soul? What does it profit us to gain the whole world and yet walk away from the truth of Christ in sorrow?

“Who then can be saved?”

Only the man who has turned from all his hope, faith and trust in anything else and is trusting in Christ alone as his only hope and true treasure in this life will in fact be saved. With man this is impossible; but through the incredible love in Christ, God has made the impossible possible.