



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, honour 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 round 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.’

Reflection

The greatest problem that humanity faces, collectively and individually, is the problem of death. We don't like to think about it, or talk about it very much, but wherever we turn in our society people are working subtly or overtly to prolong and deepen their experience of life, because life, it is quietly acknowledged by all, is a fleeting commodity. The greatest problem that we face is the problem of death.

God, of course knows this, and it pains him even more than it does us. Death is inevitable because of sin's curse. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), and since sin entered the human race way back in Genesis 3 death and judgment to follow has been the inevitable course of every human being who has ever walked the earth (barring one or two that God took prematurely to be with him). Death pains God even more than it pains us.

And so it should come as no surprise that the great theme of Jesus' preaching and his parables is the kingdom of God – how we overcome death and enter into eternal life in Heaven.

But Jesus is turning contemporary expec-

tations about the kingdom of Heaven on their heads. And today, perhaps the most likely candidate for heaven, an upright wealthy young ruler, walks away empty-handed – to the astonishment of Jesus' disciples and all who look on. Let's hear the story in Mark's words, from chapter 10, verses 17 to 27.

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Yesterday, Jesus said,

‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’

Today, we have precisely the opposite of a helpless babe. On any human measure, this man is a prime candidate for heaven. And in fact, that’s pretty much how the conversation plays out,

‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

In effect, ‘Jesus, what must I do to get into heaven.’

But Jesus, true to form, doesn’t directly answer his question. Have you noticed how often Jesus does that? It’s his way of steering the conversation to more important climes. It’s not manipulation or obfuscation, Jesus does this to answer the deeper questions of the heart, which are often unvoiced and need drawing out. And so in answering his deeper question and addressing his deepest need, Jesus takes a couple of steps back. The young ruler began with ‘Good teacher,’ Jesus reply begins with,

18 ‘Why do you call me good?’ Jesus answered. ‘No one is good – except God alone.’

Now at one level, joining the dots, this is a subtle claim to divinity; Jesus is God, and therefore he is good. But more pressingly for the rich young ruler, Jesus is setting the conversation up to answer the man’s question properly. And the best place to start questions about getting into heaven is with the fact of human sinfulness – no one is good except God alone. This established, Jesus moves on,

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, honour your father and mother.””

The ten commandments. The law, the old way, the Old Testament way, of relating to God; demonstrating your faith in him through obedience to the law and your repentance when you do sin through the sacrificial system. The young ruler answers earnestly but very naively,

20 ‘Teacher,’ he declared, ‘all these I have kept since I was a boy.’

Young, rich, and devout; but also tragically naïve. No-one is good except God alone. There is noble sincerity here but also great moral ignorance. He really did think he had kept the law, but no-one is good except God alone. The purpose of

the law was to expose our sin and drive us ever more deeply into the forgiveness and mercy of God. Which makes, ‘What must I do to get into heaven?’ the wrong question. Because entering into the kingdom of heaven, has nothing to do with what we have done, and everything to do with what Christ did on our behalf. Still, if he wants a task, Jesus gives him one, to expose his sin,

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.

Exodus 20:17, the tenth commandment, you shall not covet. He hasn't kept this one since he was a boy. What stood between this man and the kingdom of God was that he loved his possessions more than he loved God. His materialism indicated that he did not love his neighbour as himself and therefore he was not a keeper of the law. He simply was not as good a man as he had thought. Just like none of us are – the realisation which begins the journey of faith.

And, by the by, with these words Jesus was not recommending poverty or issuing a blanket statement that Christians must give away all their money. There is no problem in having a lot of money; however there is a great problem when money has a lot of you. This man's trust was

in money and not in God. When asked to choose between his two masters, with great sadness he left the one to continue worshipping the other.

No-one is good, except God alone. This is where salvation starts. The recognition, the owning up to our sinfulness. Shortly followed by repentance, and a turning away from our sin. For the rich young ruler, his presenting sin, the sin that he needed to turn away from before he could accept Jesus into his heart as his Lord and Saviour was the sin of covetousness, of materialism – the love of money.

No doubt with great sadness Jesus then makes a pronouncement that haunts us to this very day.

‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!’

But then to lighten the mood, and make the moment as memorable as possible, some humour.

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.’

The largest beast in Palestine being thrust through the eye of a needle, the impossibly small hole, that it takes several goes even to get a thread of cotton through; easier that than a rich man putting his money second behind God. No prosperity gospel here. Just the sobering reality of how many people, especially today,

are enslaved to the sinful idol of material prosperity and forfeit their place in heaven because of it.

Think & Pray

Spend some time considering this today money's grip on you. If God were to ask you to leave a considerable portion of your wealth behind could you? Or what about your career? Or your house? Is there anything in this material world that somehow, like that poor rich young ruler, has snuck up on you in your walk as a Christian and is threatening your allegiance to God as first in your life?

If so, confess your sin to God this morning and talk seriously with him about what to do. But take heart as well, because 'What

is impossible with man is possible with God.' And even if God asks you to leave it all behind, we have Jesus' assurance that treasure in heaven awaits – which is better by far – not to even mention, life and life to the full here on earth.