

Mission Impossible

How hard it is for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God! That's the climax of the Gospel lesson this morning. And once again, your preacher finds himself in an awkward position. On the one hand, I'm not sure there's a way to avoid some sense of judgment on all of us, because we are all, globally speaking, wealthy. The conclusion to this Gospel speaks directly to us in a way that ought to make us uncomfortable. Indeed, if it does not make us uncomfortable, we are not really listening. So maybe, especially after a sermon wrestling with Jesus's teaching on divorce last week, we should just set this Gospel aside.

On the other hand, however, I would be failing in my duty to proclaim the Word of God when the Word of God hits a little too close to home. So, once again, I begin with a disclaimer: none of what is said this morning is intended to be hurtful or confrontational or controversial. If any of us is confronted this morning, we are confronted by the Word of God. And we're all in that boat, together.

With that in mind, let's dive right in to this story. It is an important vignette from the last days of Jesus's ministry. It is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke and in very similar ways. All three highlight this man's youth and wealth. He is a wealthy young man. All three highlight his devotion. He is a devout young man who has kept the commandments. Luke adds that he is a "ruler." Which is why this story is often called "The Rich Young Ruler." A ruler of what? Well, he's a Jew so he's not part of the Roman elite. He doesn't rule in a political sense. Far more likely that he is the ruler, that is, President of the local synagogue. Notice that the qualities that are usually associated with fairly advanced age, this man has in his youth. He is wealthy, he is devout, and both are recognized by his religious community. He's a ruler.

Given this depiction, you'd think he'd be presented in the Gospels as one of Jesus's enemies. But he isn't. The first thing we ought to notice about this young man is that he is in every way commendable to the followers of Jesus.

The Commendable Young Man

Mark says he **runs** to Jesus. That's a small but significant detail. The man is wealthy. The man is religiously powerful. He has status. He does not run. On the contrary, people ought to run to him. For him to run is to adopt a position of inferiority. And that is what he does with Jesus. When he runs to Jesus, he adopts the junior position. Jesus is the senior in this relationship. He goes even further by **kneeling** before Jesus. He adopts the position of a student, a disciple. Jesus is the teacher in this relationship. He addresses his teacher with proper deference. He **recognizes** Jesus. "Good teacher!" The word he uses here is "agathos." That's important. He does not say "kalos," which also means good and conveys the notion of external appearance. He says, "agathos"—intrinsicly good. One whose nature is good whether it can be outwardly seen or not. Jesus rebukes him for naming as such, but the rebuke contains within itself the recognition that this young man knows more than he knows. "Why do you call me 'agathos'? No one is good from the core except God!"

Finally he asks Jesus a question. He does not come with an ulterior motive. Unlike literally everyone else in his class of people in the Gospels who come with questions, he does not come to entrap. He does not come to wrong-foot or deceive or test. He just comes with a question. If last

week's question was a disguised trap, this week's is just, well, a question. And not just any question.

He asks Jesus *the* question. This is the only question that matters! Good teacher! What must I do to inherit eternal life? He's devout. He's wealthy. He has been recognized in his community as the recipient of God's blessing—they made him a ruler in spite of his youth. He's got life with God in the bag! Except he knows he doesn't. Appearances aside, he lacks. And he straightforwardly brings his lack to Jesus. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

This young man is from top to bottom commendable. Were he to attend St. Paul's, we would all admire him. We'd make sure he got onto Council. And council would benefit from his wisdom. He would seek out the Pastor for spiritual direction, and the pastor would find in him someone willing to take direction. He is in every way commendable. To the disciples. To us. Indeed to Jesus.

The Conundrum of the Law

Jesus's answer is straightforward. It is, in short, obey the Law. He sets before this rich young man **the objective standard**. The law of God. If inheriting eternal life is down to something you have to do, then what you have to do is obey the law. All of it. All the time. It's not subjective. It's not about feelings or personal preferences. It is there on paper (or papyrus). Written in Moses. Do it and you will live.

Jesus elaborates by listing some of the commandments: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother." With the exception of fraud (which is likely a repetition of do not steal), these are all straight from the **second table** of the big 10.

The 10 commandments are divided into two tables. The first table deals with our responsibilities toward God: "Do not worship idols. Do not misuse God's name. Keep God's day." The second table names our responsibilities toward others. Jesus draws the rich young man's attention to the second table.

"All these I have kept from my youth!" What a fabulous answer. And notice that Jesus doesn't judge this answer. This young man is not a hypocrite. He is not like those religious leaders whom Jesus calls white washed tombs, whose piety is on parade, but whose secret lives are so very different. This young man has integrity. His inside matches his outside. All these—the entire second table—I have kept!

And Jesus, looking at him, **loved** him. I love this sentence—a detail found only in Mark. Do you know how rare this is? Jesus has compassion on the crowds. He has compassion on those whom he heals. But for one person to be singled out as the object of Jesus's love—that is very rare in Scripture. Jesus felt a special affection for this young man. He loves him. And he loves him enough to tell him the truth.

You lack only one thing! Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor. Then come and follow me.

You're so close to gaining the eternal life you wish to have! You've kept the commandments I mentioned—good! You know the right person to come to—good! Just do this one more thing!

Do you see Jesus looking with infinite compassion, perhaps with tears as he extends this invitation? You should. The young man has come to Jesus without horns and asked what is, at the end of the day, the only question that matters. And Jesus gives him the only answer that matters.

And we read, the young man went away sad for he had great possessions.

Almost. But. Almost saved! Listen. Almost saved is still, finally lost.

Why does Jesus single out wealth in this way? That's the right question to ask. And with that, we move into the conclusion of the story

The Constriction on the Kingdom

The young man is **attached to his wealth**. When Jesus singles out his wealth, he's not saying wealth is bad. He is saying, for this young man, wealth has become an idol. Remember, the young man has mastered the second table of the law. He has perfected it, we might say. Then, Jesus directs his attention and ours to the first table. And he names this young man's idol. The one thing that stands in competition with his devotion to God. The one thing the young man will claim at the cost of his soul. His wealth. He came to Jesus commendably. He asked Jesus the right question. Lovingly Jesus told him the truth. You love one thing more than God. Let it go and you will have eternal life. And he went away sad.

So it is, as I imagine this story, I hear Jesus's voice cracking with emotion. This young man whom he loves is walking away from him who *is* eternal life. The one who IS GOOD, who is life. He's standing right there. "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom!" I expect as the rich man walks away he hears those words, that tone. Perhaps his pace pauses. But there's no record that he turns around. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the **eye of a needle!**" I wonder if he heard those words, too. Take Jesus at his word here. The old preacher's story about a gate known as the needle's eye that, for camels to go through, had to be not only unpacked, but also made to kneel simply not true. And it misses the point. If that's the case, then it's just really hard. But Jesus's point is that entry is impossible.

It is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom. Because they're rich? No. Because they worship the idol of their wealth. All the rich young man has to do to gain eternal life is keep the law. And in spite of how commendable he is, he can't keep the whole law. He has another god. A secret god. And because he does, the law condemns him. He cannot earn eternal life.

And the disciples are astonished. Why? Because they know their Bibles. They know that the righteous prosper. They know that wealth is a sign of **God's blessing**. Hang on Jesus, if the rich aren't getting into the kingdom, who is? We've given up everything in the hope that you're going to give us even more back! Are we not in, too?

The Gift of God

The disciples get it in a way that we do not. The dilemma is that entry into the kingdom is so strict, so small, so narrow, that—listen—not even those who live blessed lives can enter. Even the rich are condemned by the law. And if the rich are, then we all are. And Jesus affirms that conviction: "With human beings it is impossible."

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Keep the whole law. And I can't! All of us, this morning, are the rich young ruler. All of us have parts of the big 10 that we've kept and continue to keep well. And were we to come to Jesus with the young ruler's question, we would likely want Jesus to focus on those commandments. Jesus, I have never stolen. Jesus, I have never borne false witness. Jesus, I have never murdered or committed adultery. Jesus, I don't even covet my neighbor's lawn mower!

And Jesus, looking at you and at me as we pile excuse upon excuse, will love us enough to tell the truth. One thing you lack. What's your one thing? What's the one thing that you are so attached to that you will keep it at the cost of your soul? For the young man in our story it was his wealth. Jesus will love you enough to let the law, the law which he wrote mind you on the very fabric of the universe, do its work: he will let it condemn you. He will let it kill you.

The next move is yours. Will you like the rich young man walk away sad? Or will you stay with Jesus long enough to hear the Good News: "With man it is impossible. But not with God. All things are possible with God."