

### What is Impossible for Men is Possible with God

Jesus has a wonderful knack for teaching by contrasting characters both from within and between stories. For an example of the former, we saw Him contrast the humbled tax-collector with the self-righteous, arrogant Pharisee to show us the right attitude that pleases God in how we approach Him (cf. **Luke 18:9-14**). But Jesus also likes to show us a character in one story and then contrast that character with another in a completely new story. I want you to just stop for a moment and appreciate the absolute beauty of God's precious Word in how these two stories are set side-by-side. First, we have this beautiful example of childlike resting in the arms of our faithful Savior Jesus, which we looked at last Sunday. If you want to see **the exact posture of heart and soul** of someone with whom God joyfully welcomes into the Kingdom of God, you can do no better than to look at the infant, calm and at rest, in Jesus' loving embrace, cradling them in His all-sufficient arms (cf. **18:16-17**). That is THE PICTURE of your salvation in Jesus!

However, if you want to see the exact opposite attitude of someone with whom we know God is at war (**Ps. 138:6; Prov. 3:34; 29:23; Matt. 23:12; Luke 1:52; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5**), then all you have to do is look at today's character, who rushes up to Jesus pressuring Him, "What must **IDO** to inherit eternal life?" (**18:18**). In a few more passages, Jesus will contrast this rich, young ruler with another – the poor, begging blind man who has no other options but to simply cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me" (**18:38**) or even another rich man, Zacchaeus, who is suddenly struck by Jesus' love and compassion for HIM, that he gives half of all his goods to the poor and whomever he has ever defrauded he pays them back fourfold. Jesus then exclaims that today salvation has come to Zacchaeus' whole household, a son of Abraham (see **19:8-9**). With this barrage of contrasting stories, the reader is left with a clear distinction of the heart and soul that pleases God and the attitude of prideful man, which God opposes (cf. **James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5**).

Our story today begins with a simple question asked by a young man (cf. **Matt. 19:20**), who we learn at the end of his interaction with Jesus, that he is also an extremely wealthy man (**Lk. 18:23**). Luke alone tells us that he was a ruler (**Lk. 18:18**), but since he was young, that probably means he wasn't a ruler among the Pharisees or the Sadducee, since they were usually older men. Rather, because of his wealth he probably was a very influential man or civic leader who was well known for his religious and ethical morality within the community. He was admired among the people as being a "good person" (cf. **Lk. 18:21**).

And he says to Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (**Luke 18:18**). By calling Jesus "good" it is clear that he sees Jesus in the group of "good people" with him. From his point of view, he and Jesus are "buddy-buddy," colleagues in a class all their own – the "good people" – in contrast to the people "out there" who are not good.

Jesus immediately chooses to disassociate himself from the young man's "click" and leave him alone

in a class all by himself. Jesus asks, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (Lk. 18:19). Now, why does Jesus do this? Does Jesus really not believe He is "good"? Is He denying here that He is God? No and No! That's not what Jesus is saying at all and it will soon be clear that this young man is in no current place for a theology lesson.

To understand what Jesus is doing, we have to sit back and minute and get a better picture of the overall situation here. Have you ever had someone gratuitously flatter you for the ultimate purpose of saying something good about themselves? They build you up so they can say they too must be good because they associate with you. You see it all the time with celebrities or famous sport figures. Their friends gather around them constantly to tell them how great they are so that they can feel better about themselves because they are associated with them. That's what the rich, young ruler is doing to Jesus. He sees himself as good (as we will see shortly) and he see Jesus as good and because he gets to rub shoulders with Jesus, he too must be good.

But Jesus explains to the young man that no one is good but God NOT because He is trying to give the young man a lesson in who Jesus is but so that He might help the young man understand who he, the young ruler, is before God. Jesus tells the young man, "No one is good except God alone!"

You can imagine at that moment Jesus pauses and stares into the young man's eyes, as if to say, "Do you get it?" He wants the young ruler to take a moment and process what Jesus just said. He is attempting **to shock** the young man out of his blindness, his confusion that if left alone he will most certainly die an eternal death. He tells the ruler, "Only God is good. You are not God. Therefore, you are not good!" But does he grasp the significance of what Jesus is telling him? Do you grasp what Jesus is essentially saying about you this morning when He looks at you and says, "No one is good except God alone!"? Or maybe we could say it like this, "Only God, God alone, is good – righteous – and NO ONE else in the universe is good or righteous but God only!"

Paul has to drive this into our hard-hearted hearts with these words taken from the Psalter:

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; <sup>11</sup> THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; <sup>12</sup> ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE." (Rom. 3:10-12).

Jesus and Paul have to say it like this because everything in our fallen being is offended, repulsed, disgusted by the truth of what we really are before God! When we are told by God that we are not good, we make every possible excuse, we come back with every possible response as to why it's not that we are not good it is just that we have been misunderstood or we had extenuating circumstances for why we didn't do the right thing. We try and pass the buck, continually passing it up the ladder until finally place all the blame on God Himself for why we come up short. But there is Jesus, standing there at the end to remind us that we are not good. God alone is good. No one is good except God alone!

Now, let me let you in on a wonderful secret. Once God has given you a new, Spirit-wrought heart from above, you will come back to this same story (after a second or third reading) and you will see a whole something altogether marvelous – a whole new level of what Jesus is implying. Remember what Jesus said back in **Luke 10:21-24 (READ)**? Once this happens, and for those for whom this has already taken place, we will certainly gain incredible clarity today by the end of our passage, we will see **the primary thrust** of this story when Jesus makes the comment, “No one is good except God alone!” Once you have been regenerated and given new eyes to see, you will read this and get what Jesus is saying. “No one is good except God alone!” Do you get it? Do you see it? What Jesus is saying is that if it is true that Jesus is in fact “good” and only God alone is good, then we are safe to conclude **that Jesus is God**. Further, if only those who are “good” can inherit eternal life, and we are not good – think again what the man is asking Jesus - “what must I DO” – then the only way **all of us who are not good** are going to inherit eternal life, or salvation, **is if Jesus gains eternal life for us**. That is the KEY of the whole passage! In fact, **it is the KEY of the whole Bible** – God sets a standard before all of us that we MUST achieve to inherit eternal life and the **ONLY** way we can achieve it is **IF GOD ALONE DOES IT FOR US** – and beloved, that is exactly WHO Jesus is and why Jesus has come!!! That is the GOOD NEWS of the Bible!

Now to help the young man see just how far he is from God's righteousness, Jesus begins to list God's commands, but notice the specific kinds of commands Jesus lists (**see Luke 18:20**). Jesus focuses the man's attention on the commandments that deal specifically how we relate to one another. But why would Jesus do this? Let's think about how Jesus answers the man's question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”. What the man must do to inherit eternal life is simple - obey God's commandments – do what God requires of you!

Notice that this is a theme that runs all the way throughout Scripture. God will tell man, whether Adam in the garden or His children, Israel, or even at the final end of time:

<sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. (**Rev. 20:12-13**).

It is no secret that the only way man is going to be saved is by perfect obedience to God's law. No one is saved who is not a doer of the Law of God and a perfect one at that! Paul made this absolutely clear for us:

<sup>10</sup> For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." <sup>11</sup> Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." <sup>12</sup> However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." (Gal. 3:10-12).

Again, sinful man doesn't like to hear this! He doesn't want to hear that God requires something from man that MAN CANNOT DO! The sinner thinks that if God gives us a challenge, we can do it! But remember Luther's old adage, "the Law is for good people; the Gospel is for sinners."

So Jesus presses the young man with God's commands and the commands Jesus chooses are those that affect our relationship with others. Again, why? Because the only way I can feel good about myself – that I am good – is by pointing out the warts of my neighbor and looking down on them because they are not as good as I am. So Jesus focuses the young man's heart on how he treats his neighbor. This is essentially what God did to the lawyer who asked Jesus the same question (**Luke 10:25**). Jesus tells him to keep the Law and when the lawyer didn't get it (**10:29**) Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan (**10:30-37**). Why? For the same reason Jesus does the same to this young, rich ruler. Very simply the way we treat one another, especially the weakest among us, tells us what we think about God. How is that? It is out of a deep knowledge of God's supremacy that I am humbled before God and will treat others out of humility. It is out of a knowledge of God's mercy and forgiveness for me that I will treat others with the same mercy and forgiveness. It is only because I am deeply loved that I will learn to love others. When Jesus tells the rich, young ruler to go and treat others as God commanded, Jesus is doing spiritual surgery on the man. He is opening him up to what the young man truly cares about.

Now, at first, the foolish young man is confident in how he rates before God's standard of holiness (**v. 21**). Since his youth, he has kept all these commands. **Now, this shouldn't surprise us, right?** Most people, living in the world, think they are OK before God and doing just fine. We tend to feel good about ourselves. Most of us, especially Americans, do not suffer from low-self-esteem. After all, we are not all Stephen Paddock's killing innocent people perched on high from our hotel room. We are mostly good compared to him and we feel good about that after all. But, most will not find out how far they actually fall short of God's glory until the day of judgment when it will be too late. We have every reason to believe, according to Jesus' own promise that only a few will inherit eternal life (**cf. Luke 13:22-30; Matt. 7:13-14**) – that only a very small percentage of the human race will be brought, by God, to humble state, by which they will cry out to Jesus for mercy.

So Jesus tries a new tactic, a different angle, to help the man see his real problem (**Lk. 18:22**). What is Jesus doing here? Well, He isn't setting a new standard for mankind to take vows of poverty if they want to be let into heaven. You will notice that if that is all Jesus is saying, then not only would that play right into the heart of the young man who already wants TO DO something to inherit eternal life, but Jesus came a long way and went through an incredible, painful separation from His Father just to tell us to give all our money to the poor. No! Jesus is not giving us a new doorway into heaven. He is telling this specific man, in his specific situation, what he specifically needed to hear. And the emphases is not on his giving everything to the poor – all that did was unveil his idol. No, the specific tragedy of this poor man's soul was the invitation to come follow Jesus. What do I mean? When Jesus tells him "to take all he has and give it away to the poor" (**Lk. 18:22**) all Jesus is doing is revealing the man's idolatry. Jesus could easily do this to you this morning. Think of the one non-negotiable in your life that you are unwilling to part with. Would it be your spouse or your children?

Is it your job or your bank account or retirement plan? How about your house or your car or your hobby? What are you unwilling to part with? What defines you this morning? If Jesus were to come to you and tell you to give it away and come after Him, what would you do? What would you say? Would you be willing to part with your children to follow Jesus? How about never seeing your spouse again? Maybe you can't think of your life without your job or your bank account to fall back on. If Jesus told you to give it and follow Him, how many of you would tell Jesus, "No WAY!" You are not enough to give up all that! You see, it wasn't that the young man didn't understand what Jesus was telling him. It is just that he rejected Jesus. And when he rejected Jesus in order to keep his money suddenly it was revealed to him what his "god" was. The same is true for you this morning. If Jesus tells you to give up your spouse, your child, your job, your future, and follow Him – when you refuse Him then you are displaying who or what is your God.

Now, we need to ask **why** the young man was unwilling to give up his riches in order to follow Jesus, but the truly interesting question is not what he was unwilling to do with his wealth **but why he wasn't willing to follow Jesus**. The answer is the same for both questions. It might be helpful to think of the life of Job here, along with what Jesus is about to say to his disciples. When everything was taken away from Job to prove God's point, in the end of the story we are told that God gave back to Job twice as much as Job had lost (**Job 42:10**). The disciples are concerned about the same (**see Luke 18:28**). They too want to know if giving up everything and following Jesus will be worth it? **That's the issue! That is the whole hook that is latching onto man forbidding him to choose God!** The rich, young ruler doesn't realize – can't see – what he will gain from following Jesus – an eternal reward – compared to what he has in his bank account. The missionary Jim Elliot famously quipped, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Can you imagine what a fool he will soon be exposed to be when he wakes up in Hell – eternal death – knowing he was unwilling to let go of a mammon to follow Jesus?

That's why Jesus answers his disciples with a rather strange comparison (**v. 25** – it is easier for a camel [the largest animal in that region] to go through the eye of needle [the smallest object that most people would see everyday]. Yes it is a funny picture and that is the point. It is almost impossible for someone who has a lot of creature-comforts around him or her to willingly give them up for anything. Very simply, we don't like to suffer. The last thing anyone of us would **WANT** to have happen to us is lose his house, wife, children, parents, etc. (**v. 29**). But Jesus assures each of us who are willing to give those things up to follow Jesus [and note how the disciples talk about giving up things and Jesus is talking about giving up people, which many, many Christians have had to do throughout the history of the church, down to today – think of a young Muslim woman living in Saudi Arabia who chooses to embrace Jesus as her Savior] – He assures us that it will be worth it (**Luke 18:29-30**). Think of the cost she would have to pay, perhaps even her own life, to follow Jesus! That's what Jesus is talking about! But Jesus assures each of us that eternal life with Him will be worth all the sacrifices we are called to make for Him. But sadly, most people on planet earth will be unwilling to make those sacrifice! Perhaps someone here this morning is sitting here unwilling to give something up to follow Jesus. What is that, which you are unwilling to give up? Why? Do you really think that God is not able to provide you with eternal treasures which far out weigh anything

you could possibly lose in this life? Jesus defined eternal life this way:

"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. (Jn. 17:3) <sup>24</sup> "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. <sup>25</sup> "O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; <sup>26</sup> and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (Jn. 17:24-26).

Can you believe that that young man was unwilling to give up money – stupid money – in order to know God, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom the Father had sent? He would rather have his bank account rather than know the love that the Father has had for the Son and the Son had for the Father and to be embraced by the heavenly Father with the same love that He has eternally loved His Son. Can you think of a greater loss than this? An eternal loss! This young man rolled the dice, he played his hand, and he came up ETERNALLY SHORT! Why?

Because he didn't believe knowing Jesus – following Jesus – would be worth it. But Paul said two times:

<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16-18).<sup>16</sup> The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. <sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:16-18)

When you look at Jesus and then you look at your stuff, what could possibly be more gloriously beautiful than Him? If you hear me ask this question this morning and the only answer you can come up with is EVERYTHING is more beautiful than Jesus. I am unwilling to give up my temporary treasures to have the one eternal treasure – Jesus Christ. Then you need to hear what Jesus says next! The disciples clearly hear what Jesus is saying and they are shocked (v. 26). For them, to be rich is to be blessed by God. To be poor, is to be cursed. If the rich, who are blessed by God, cannot make it into heaven, then what hope is there for the rest of us?

**Jesus' answer is so beautiful!** With man, you are right. It is impossible. There is absolutely no hope if the answer must come from you and me. BUT, with God and with God alone eternal life is not only possible, it is reality. And that is why Jesus has come – to do the impossible!

**Amen! -SDG-**