

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31  
Message: The Greatest Sacrifice  
March 11, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON  
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This passage from Proverbs 30:7-9 came to mind this past week as I was working on this message:

“Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die:  
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.  
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God.”

I love this story from Mark 10. There is so much we can relate to. This man who came running up to Jesus thought that he was doing pretty good for himself. Something inside said he should find out for sure if there was anything more which he had to do to inherit eternal life. Who else to ask but the wise rabbi and teacher, Jesus.

“How do I know for sure I’m going to heaven, Jesus? What do I have to do to lock up this eternal life thing? There must be some kind of checklist. I want to make sure I’m not missing anything. So...Jesus...what must I do?”

We can just see the gears churning in this man’s mind as Jesus gives his answer:

Do not murder. Check.

Do not commit adultery. Check.

Do not steal. Check.

Do not give false testimony. Check.

Do not defraud. Check.

Honour your father and mother. Check.

“Got it, Jesus. I’ve been doing that for a few years already. Quite well, too, if I say so myself. I can even give you a few references, if you would like. You know, some character references, so you don’t just have to take my word for it. So...is there anything else?”

We can relate to this fellow. We’ve got our own good track record, our own checklist. We can measure ourselves up against the law and find some flaws here and there. We’re humble enough to admit that we’re not perfect. But we’re good. We do good.

But is it good enough? Is it enough to give confidence of eternal life? Can we say for

sure that we're going to go to heaven when we die? Are we missing something? It's as if this man in front of Jesus, and we ourselves, have this nagging doubt that we don't quite have it all together. Maybe there's something else.

Jesus looked at him and loved him. Can't you just see Jesus turning around and looking directly into this man's eyes with compassion and pity. Jesus saw the struggle for peace, for assurance in this man's heart. Jesus knew that external obedience to the law of God would not bring a quiet confidence of eternal life, because no one could give the perfect obedience which God requires.

Pause and consider that for a minute: the compassionate heart of Jesus looking you in the eyes. Did you come here today with that self-assured confidence that you're a pretty good person? And yet you dare not say, "I *know* I'm going to heaven." Do you look at your life and say, "I do quite well as far as obedience goes." Yet something tells you it can't be that easy. What else could there be? Can you really be sure of your salvation?

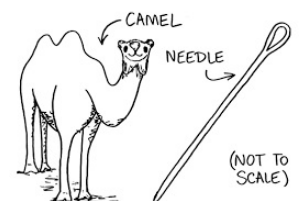
Jesus tells us. There's one more thing. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

We could possibly take these words of Jesus as one more thing to do. Just another good deed to earn salvation. But that's not what Jesus is saying.

Remember what Jesus said at the beginning of this conversation: "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone." God is the one who needs to be trusted. He is the one who gives eternal life. Recognizing that trust in a good God, Jesus is saying "Don't let your earthly possessions get in the way of trusting this good God. If you do not have *possessions* to trust in, you will better show your complete confidence and self-surrender to God."

Jesus expressly adds an invitation to come "follow me." Following Jesus, the Son of God, involves self-denial. It means giving up looking for security anywhere else but in Jesus. It means devoting yourself to nothing other than serving Jesus.

It was too much to ask for the rich man. He couldn't do it. Jesus responds to the rich man's refusal by saying to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." He emphasizes his point with the comparison that a camel going through the eye of a needle is easier than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.



But that's impossible! Exactly right. I used to think that Jesus was talking about a low gate in the stone wall of the city. In order to go through it, a camel would have to crawl on its knees. And camels don't like crawling on their knees, so it would be hard to get a camel through the small gate, nicknamed the 'Needle Gate.'

Actually, there is no such Needle Gate. Also, if we rationalize Jesus' statement in that way, we are actually making something *possible* that Jesus says is impossible. Jesus is saying that it is impossible for a rich man, in his own power, to try to work or earn or buy his way into the kingdom of God. Money might get you into a lot of places, but it won't get you to heaven. In fact, wealth or riches or things can have a powerful hold on the heart of a person. It can interfere with the expression of humble trust in God and surrender to God that is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven.

It is so easy to want more. The pressure of advertising is tremendous. It is so easy to make money or possessions or 'stuff' to be so important and to be a source of meaning or purpose in one's life. Those possessions displace God as most important, which is idolatry. This idolatry is to get more and more for ourselves rather than seeking to first honour God or to love our neighbour.

"Give up everything you have and follow me." Jesus is not against having money. There are other stories of rich people in the Bible who serve God well. We only have to think about the Good Samaritan who used his money to pay the medical bills of a wounded man. Or rich Joseph of Arimathea who took Jesus' body off the cross and placed it in his own new tomb. Or Barnabas who sold his possessions and gave to the poor. Jesus is not against being rich or having possessions. Jesus is warning about the controlling force that possessions can have in our lives. Where are we placing our trust? If possessions have too great a hold, get rid of them. Learn in whatever state you are to be content--because the Lord provides and he will give us all we need. "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13.)

That's hard to do. That's a tall order. We're not so ready to give up everything. We catch ourselves putting too much confidence in our own wealth or possessions or things. Certainly we are not poor. Do we then fit in the category of those for whom it is so hard to enter the kingdom of God?

Yes, we probably do. And it does us good to face that and admit that, for then we can

understand Jesus' next words better. With God all things are possible. Each one of us must realize that with all our wealth, or with all our effort, or with all our good intentions, or with all of our checklists, we won't even get close to entering the kingdom of God. No closer than getting a camel through the eye of a needle.

So where does that put you or me? We could say, "What's the use in trying?" Like the rich young man we may be tempted to walk away sad and disappointed, having no hope.

When we realize that we stand helpless before God, with not a penny to our credit, with all our faults and failures exposed, we can give *everything* up to God, claiming nothing for ourselves. God does what is necessary to get us in the kingdom of heaven. Through Jesus Christ, God's only Son, we can be saved. God promises to bless us beyond our imaginings in the eternal life that awaits us.

What is impossible for us is possible for God. Jesus has made the greatest sacrifice to make a payment for sin that we could never make. In Jesus, God saves us, forgives us, adopts us as his children, gives us life, welcomes us into his presence. He gives us the greatest blessings we could ever receive. God gives us his Holy Spirit to help us in our walk of thankful obedience.

We respond with the greatest sacrifice of our own: to give up our trust in ourselves or in all that we have and give it over to God. We surrender everything so that our trust is completely in God alone. We don't trust in our own power or efforts or good deeds to get to heaven. We trust in God to save us. We make this sacrifice because Jesus made the sacrifice of himself for us. Therefore we trust in God and his forgiving grace, and we can *know* we have eternal life. It's not about us or our effort. It's about what God does for us.

"Nothing compares to the promise I have in you." Hear God's invitation and promise. Put your trust for life and death completely in Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. He gives the free gift of eternal life. To God be the glory!

Amen.