

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 18:18-30

Sermon #1264

October 29, 2023

Erich Jonathan Hoeft

18 A certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

19 Jesus asked him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good, except one— God. 20 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother.’”

21 “I have kept all these since I was a child,” he said.

22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

23 But when the ruler heard these words, he became very sad, because he was very rich.

24 When Jesus saw that the man became very sad, he said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! 25 In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 Those who heard this said, “Then who can be saved?”

27 He replied, “What is impossible for people is possible for God.”

28 And Peter said, “Look, we have left our possessions and followed you.”

29 He said to them, “Amen I tell you: Anyone who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will most certainly receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life.”

Dear Friends and Fellow Redeemed in Christ,

There are a lot of encounters with Jesus that we find in the Scriptures. There’s that one time when Jesus encountered this widow of Nain and raised her son. There was an encounter between Jesus and a woman at a well. There was an encounter between Jesus and 10 lepers and Jesus and one leper. There was that encounter between Jesus and a lame man lowered through a roof. Throughout the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) Jesus encountered all kinds of different men, women, and children and in every instance, those who encountered Jesus walked away healed, or blessed, or happy, or saved, or alive. Except here. Today, in our lesson, the man who encountered Jesus walked away sad. To my knowledge, this

is the only time that this happens in the gospels. Only this specific man in our lesson had an encounter with Jesus that ended in disappointment.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this disappointing encounter for us. Today, we are looking at Luke's account. Luke tells us that **"a certain ruler asked him, asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Matthew and Mark add a few details to this initial encounter with Jesus. Mark tells us that this man ran up to Jesus and fell to his knees as he asked his question. Matthew tells us that this was a young man. So, here you have this successful gentleman, this rich young ruler, and he comes to Jesus with *the* most important question of his life. "What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus, how do I get saved?"

You see this man's life was like a puzzle. He had carefully chosen and placed every piece of his life. He had wealth, he had authority, he had youth, he indicates in verse 21 that he was a morally good man but, as he was putting together this puzzle of his life, he realized one piece was still missing. One piece was lacking. He wasn't sure about his eternity. And what is most interesting here is that this was obviously a very proud man, a self-righteous man, yet, you get this touch of despair. You sense this uncertainty...and so he runs to Jesus.

This man must have heard that Jesus had answers. Maybe Jesus had the final piece of the puzzle to his life. So, this man calls Jesus good and asks his question. "How do I get saved." Now, you and I know that Jesus had that piece of the puzzle, but how he gives it to this man, well, it's incredible. I mean just follow this.

Jesus' first response to the man seemingly has nothing to do with the question that is asked. Jesus questions why the man thinks Jesus is "good." Now, of course, Jesus was good. He was and is perfect. But, Jesus doesn't say that here, instead, he reminds the man that only God is good. You see Jesus is meeting this man where he is at. This man thought he could be good; he thought he was good, but Jesus is clear, only God is good. This plays into what Jesus does next. He lays out the 2nd table of the law, commandments 4-10 which focus on love for others, your neighbor.

Jesus said, **"You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother.'"** Listen to the guy's response, **"I have kept all these since I was a child,"** he said. "I've done those." This is child's play for me. I've been

doing this since I could walk. And, yet, what is interesting here is that he still doesn't feel like he's done enough to be saved. He figures there has got to be something that he is missing. One more thing to check off his list. Again, there is this pride, but also this desperation and despair. It's all there in this man.

It's here, um, that the gospel of Mark adds something to the story that we don't get in Luke. After this man claims he's kept these commandments since his youth Mark tells us that, **"Jesus looked at him and loved him."** This is perhaps the exact opposite of what I would have done in this moment. I would've looked at this guy and said, "Liar! You are so full of it! There is no way you've kept all these commandments." Jesus doesn't say that. He loves the man. He loves the man enough to say these next words: **"You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** Jesus wanted this man to succeed. He wanted him to have treasure in heaven, and he showed him the way.

But what happened next? – this is what makes this encounter different from every other encounter with Jesus recorded for us – **"when the ruler heard these words, he became very sad, because he was very rich."** This man came to Jesus knowing that he was lacking something, but he assumed that he could obtain what he was lacking. He assumed he could do something good. Jesus took this man's logic and gave him something he couldn't do: he couldn't be completely dependent on God. And what's so crazy in this story is that the man knew it. He became sad. He didn't repent. He didn't go and sell everything he had. He didn't follow Jesus. He became sad. He couldn't fully trust in God alone. So ends this disappointing encounter with Jesus.

Now, what's Jesus teaching us here? Well, one, he is teaching us that nobody loves God with all their heart, strength, and mind, nobody does that. You and I don't do that. The real problem this man had and the real problem you and I have is that deep down we are not good, and this man was trying to pretend that he was. And with one simple direction, "Go sell your stuff and give it to the poor." Jesus reveals this man's sin. And tells him what he doesn't want to hear, but probably knew all along, that on some level he realized he's not actually that good.

You know what? You and I actually aren't that good either. Okay, but some of you here maybe already knew you weren't good. This isn't new news. It's quite evident to you that you are a wretched sinner and you're constantly carrying around this guilt, this shame. It's awful living for you. You keep sinning. You keep failing. It's hard, depressing even. And so here is what we do, whether you're self-righteous and think you're good or you know you're not good and you're definitely lacking something, and ironically enough we, like the rich man in our story, are often both, here is what we do: We all pretend there is this horizontal line in life.

And up here is good and down here is bad. Up here is the moral and down here the immoral. Up here the nice. Down here the nasty. Up here religious. Down here irreligious. Everyone, you and I included, see that this is the line, and we place ourselves somewhere above or below it while also using it to judge others. But here is what this encounter with Jesus teaches us, that dividing line, it's not horizontal; it's vertical and, whether you're good or bad, moral or immoral, nasty or nice, we are all on the same side of this vertical line, the wrong side. And, across from us, across from you, is Jesus, and the only way to cross over to him, the only way to be saved, the only way to have treasure in heaven, has nothing to do with you, but everything to do with him. This is how you encounter Jesus, and this is how he loves you.

Like with this rich, successful man, Jesus seeks to rid you and me of anything that we might try to depend on more than him so that we are forced to only depend on him. That's why Jesus said, **"it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."** If it's impossible for me to be saved then all my good works, my wealth, anything I think is even semi-righteous doesn't mean squat. This forces me to repent and look for something or someone else to save me.

Now, why is Jesus being so hard on the rich? Well, it takes just as much of a miracle to redeem the rich as the poor, problem here is the rich more often fail to see it's a miracle. Why? Riches, success give you an illusion of self-sufficiency. "I've got this figured out. I've learned how to take care of myself." So, Jesus teaches this rich man to humble himself and get rid of that which currently is holding him back from full dependency on God.

Of course, the disciples heard this and asked the all-important question: “If this successful, rich, morally good man, can’t be saved, “well, who then can be saved?” Yeah, that’s the point. No one can. That’s the point. And it sets up perfectly what Jesus says next in verse 27, “**What is impossible for people is possible for God.**” What beautiful words!

I mean think about this, every encounter with Jesus that you find in the Bible had these essential elements: 1) Someone desperately in need, be it physically or spiritually. 2) Someone who couldn’t solve their one need, their problem. And 3) Someone whose only hope then was what he or she knew about Jesus, that he, and he alone, might possibly be able to help and save.

Our encounter with Jesus is no different. Our need is total, and our ability to help ourselves is nonexistent. So, Jesus goes and makes the impossible not only possible but a blessed reality. And he does it not with threats, not with violence, but with compassion and forgiveness – he loves you. You know often when we think of heaven, we think of how great it will be for us, and we forget just what our presence in heaven will mean for God. Your being in heaven will fill him with joy; you are his treasure in heaven.

That is why Jesus gave up when we could not. He walked to a cross and gave up his life. That’s why Jesus was good when we could never be. He was perfect. He did these things to serve his Father and to save his family, you. He did it because he loves you so much more than he loves himself. That’s why he’s not asking you to do the impossible and to save yourself. Instead, he’s simply asking for you to trust that he already did the impossible. He died for you. He saved you. It’s all him. In this way, he shatters any self-righteousness in your heart while also lifting you from the pit of crushing despair. Now, now you can follow. And look what you get...

Verses 29 and 30, “**Amen I tell you: Anyone who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will most certainly receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life.**” As you follow Jesus, as you leave everything behind and depend on him only, you have eternal life. And every time you encounter Jesus in his Word, the Spirit will remind you of that, that you don’t have to save yourself....thank God!

So, don't walk away too soon. Always, stay to listen. Because it's only here in these encounters with Jesus that the impossible becomes possible and you become good, perfect in your heavenly Father's eyes, all on account of what Jesus did to give you eternal life with him. Amen.