

“With God, All Things Are Possible”

The Thirty-First in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 10:17-31; Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Throughout his gospel, Mark has repeatedly emphasized the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth, the kingdom of God draws near. As Jesus has gone about his messianic mission throughout Galilee and in the Gentile regions of Lebanon and the Decapolis, and now as Jesus heads south toward Jerusalem, it has become very apparent that the demands of the kingdom of God differ radically from the expectations of sinful men and women. Jesus has been proclaiming that entrance into the kingdom of God cannot be gained through good works, nor through ethnicity or high social standing—a difficult message for first century Jews to accept. Nor does the kingdom of God cater to the whims of sinful men and women. Jesus bestows membership in the kingdom of God upon those who are the least (which is why children serve as a perfect example), as well as the dregs of society (Matthew’s tax collecting friends). Therefore, when the kingdom draws near, God inevitably confounds the self-righteous who think that their own righteousness makes them worthy of that kingdom.

As we continue our series on Mark, we are currently working our way through chapter ten. Throughout this section of Mark, Jesus has been instructing his disciples about a number of important matters so as to prepare them for the difficult days yet to come. In order to prepare the twelve to preach the gospel later on, Jesus has been teaching them about the nature and character of the kingdom of God, in light the erroneous views of Pharisees, who taught that the righteousness which God accepts is mere external conformity to the law. Jesus’ disciples are clearly struggling to understand these things since they are being forced to “unlearn” almost everything they had previously believed about God’s purposes for Israel and their own personal deliverance from sin.

As we noted last time, two very significant things are going on in Mark 10. The first of these is the change in geographic location, as Jesus leaves Capernaum for the last time and begins to make his way south towards Jerusalem for the evitable and final conflict with the religious leaders of Israel. The other thing going on in Mark 10 is that Jesus returns to teaching his disciples and the crowds about the kingdom of God. When confronted by Jewish religious leaders, Jesus contrasts the character and demands of his kingdom with the self-serving hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who, through their mishandling of the Old Testament, set up a religion of self-righteousness which amounted to an end-run around the clear teaching of Scripture. The Pharisees’ misinterpretation of the Torah, only led to greater levels of sin, and at the same time undermined the authority of the very law they saw themselves as defending.

When Jesus entered Perea, just across the Jordan River, he was now in the area controlled by Herod. Having heard that Jesus had a restrictive view of divorce, the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking a question about his views on this matter. No doubt, the Pharisees were hoping that Jesus would use this as an opportunity to speak out against divorce, just as John the Baptist had done some years earlier. Recall that when John criticized Herod’s divorce, Herod had John arrested and eventually put to death. The Pharisees were hoping that Jesus would likewise offend Herod and be arrested. At the time of Jesus, virtually all the Rabbis taught that Moses allowed for divorce on the grounds of indecency. In practice, virtually any man who sought a divorce was granted one by the Rabbis, on the grounds of any “indecency” he could find, even if that indecency was something as trivial as displeasing his wife, the so-called “burnt toast” divorce.

Once again, Jesus thoroughly confounds his questioners when they try to trap him. When the Pharisees asked Jesus about the so-called “divorce exception” in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Jesus turned the tables by informing them that while Moses did grant a certificate of divorce on the grounds of indecency, Moses meant something more significant than burnt toast. Moses also required that the wife be protected by a certificate of divorce, which released her from the marriage and even allowed for remarriage. Of course, the Pharisees had neglected that part of Deuteronomy 24, in favor of an interpretation which granted the husband an easy divorce. The implication to be drawn from this is that the Pharisees heart’s were every bit as hard as that of the Jews in the days of Moses.

Furthermore, Jesus took this opportunity to remind the Pharisees that marriage must be understood in light of the original creation mandate—something the Pharisees completely overlooked. According to Genesis 1 and 2, when two people marry, they become one flesh, a union which God blesses and affirms as something not to be divided. This is God’s purpose for marriage, not the exception granted by Moses. In fact, once they are in private, Jesus explained to his disciples how such a lax view of marriage and divorce actually created adulterers, since a man or a woman who divorced their spouse without biblical grounds, actually ends-up committing adultery should they remarry. The Pharisees had not only set up a system which ignored the creation mandate so as to favor the husband, the Pharisees were also creating adulterers, and this in the name of championing the law against the supposed law-breaker, Jesus.

Returning to the theme of how one enters the kingdom of God, in Mark 10:13-16 Mark recounts Jesus’ angry response to his disciples, who were forbidding parents from bringing their little ones to Jesus. It was customary for first century Palestinian Jews to seek a rabbinic blessing of their children. But the disciples told parents to stop bringing their children to Jesus. Either the disciples did not want the parents bothering Jesus, or more likely, they were miffed that parents did not seek out their permission to approach Jesus. In any case, Jesus sternly rebuked the disciples because these children are not only participants in the kingdom of God, they are the perfect example of how people enter that kingdom. Children simply receive what is given them. Says Jesus, unless people are willing to become like children and simply receive that which God freely gives them—entrance into the kingdom—people will never enter. This is a lesson the disciples must learn, and learn soon, since Jesus’ mission is about to come to its great climax as he heads toward Jerusalem where he will suffer and die for our sins.

The discussion as to how one enters the kingdom of God makes a perfect backdrop for yet another incident which deals with entrance into the kingdom, and that is the account of a man who has come to be known to us only as “the rich young ruler.” And it is to his story—recorded in Mark 10:17-27, that we now turn.

Palestinian Judaism in the time of Jesus, was a religion preoccupied with personal righteousness and social standing. If the kingdom of God operated on human expectations, it would make sense that those who manifest the highest degree of piety would be first to enter, followed by the pillars of the community: the religious leaders, the blue-bloods, the wealthy, and the powerful. What follows is the perfect illustration of how the kingdom of God confounds all such sinful notions held by those who think they will enter that kingdom because they are pious, because they come from the right family, because they have enough money, power and fame. Jesus overturns all such human expectations by contrasting the way sinful humans think about such things, with the way God views such things. The dialogue not only leaves a pious young man crest-fallen, but Jesus also shocks the disciples as well when Jesus seems

to totally dismiss this man's seeming sincerity.¹ Just as a child was a perfect illustration of the kingdom, the pious young rich man is the perfect illustration of how wrong people can be about the things of God.

According to Mark (10:17), "*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?'*" This incident made a huge impact upon the disciples because it is recorded in all three gospels. Jesus was leaving wherever it was he was staying (Mark doesn't say where), when a young man suddenly made his way to Jesus and fell on his knees before him. The picture is that of a worried man, who can't wait to get an answer to his question. His gestures demonstrate great respect for Jesus and an acknowledgment that Jesus was a distinguished teacher of the law. Jews did not think it appropriate to kneel before just any man, so it is clear that the man recognizes in Jesus a great Rabbi and someone to who great homage is due.²

Throughout the Old Testament, only God is called "good" in an ultimate sense, while people are called good in a relative sense. God is infinitely good, while man and woman can be "good" in only comparison to other sinful people. When this man calls Jesus "good teacher," it is important to notice that there is no biblical precedent for this.³ Calling Jesus "good teacher" is truly remarkable. This young man knows that Jesus is not just any famous Rabbi and therefore his question is sincere. That the man asked Jesus specifically about inheriting eternal life is also very significant. In light of his question, this man is deeply concerned about the greatest of all of life's questions, "how do I get to heaven?"

Even though he inquires about eternal life and seems genuinely worried about it, by the time the dialogue with Jesus is over, sadly, it becomes all too apparent that this man is not really interested enough in eternal life to actually do what Jesus tells him.⁴ Notice too that the man specifically asks what it is that he must *do* to inherit eternal life. Asking the question in this way, sure seems to indicate that the man feels entitled to eternal life based on what he does and he thinks he has it within himself to attain it.⁵ He just needs to know what it is that he must do, so he *can* do it. This is the error that Jesus is seeking to correct. No one can do anything to inherit eternal life, eternal life must be bestowed by God.

Jesus' answer to the man's question, quickly exposes the fact that the young man does not understand near as much as he thinks he does about the way in which one inherits eternal life. In verses 18-19, we read "*Why do you call me good?'* Jesus answered. *'No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'*" In his response, the first thing Jesus does is remind this young man that God alone is good. This forces the man to consider the fact that either Jesus is God or

¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 399.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 364.

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 401.

⁴ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 327.

⁵ Contra France, who states "it is sometime suggested that *ti poiaso* is meant to betray a Pelagian concept of salvation by works, but the narrative does not support this." France says Mark is "untroubled by any controversy over faith and works." But it seems to me, this is the whole point of Jesus' explanation of the disciples' quandary in 27. See France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 401.

else he has a very faulty view of human goodness.⁶ In this case, both things are true. Jesus is God in human flesh and this man will soon be forced to admit that he thinks that he too is good.

What Jesus has just done is ask the man to compare himself to the law—the commandments Jesus has just listed—and then evaluate his own righteousness in light of these particular commands. When the man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him exactly what he must do—obey the commandments of God. This reflects the teaching of Deuteronomy 30:15 ff (part of our Old Testament lesson). *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.”*

As a sign of how far the Jews of Jesus’ day had fallen in terms of their understanding of what the law truly requires of us, Jesus must force this man to consider the fact that obedience to the law entails much more than mere external conformity to the commandment. True goodness is defined by the law, which demands a perfect obedience from us. In other words, when the law tells us we must not steal, this means that we must never even entertain the thought of taking something that doesn’t belong to us. When Jesus tells this young man that the law commands us not to commit adultery, he means that this extends even to adulterous thoughts. Like this young man, we may have never killed anyone, cheated on our spouse, stolen someone’s property, lied about our neighbor, nor dishonored our parents. But we have done all of these things, and more, in our hearts. To put it another way, our hands may be clean, while at the same time our hearts are black. That is Jesus’ point. This is what the law of God is designed to do—demand perfection of us, expose our secret sins, and condemn us when we don’t meet its standards.

The young man’s response is not only sadly representative of how the Jews had externalized the law, the young man reflects the thinking of virtually every non-Christian we can think of. He boldly informs Jesus, *“Teacher, he declared, ‘all these I have kept since I was a boy.’”* This man really does believe that from the time of his youth, he has fulfilled what God has commanded. Indeed, this was what he had been taught. If he never cheated on his wife, he was not an adulterer. If he never stole from his neighbor, he was not a thief. But Jesus, who is the author of the law, has told us elsewhere that if we even look upon a member of the opposite sex with lust, we have already committed adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:27). In reciting the commandments to this young man, Jesus has already condemned him.

But the young man doesn’t see it. If he had, he would have said, “Teacher, what then can I do, since I am a sinner?” “Will you save me?” Instead, the young man tells Jesus, “I’ve done all that God commanded.” As one writer points out, if he had really tried to keep the commandments he would have quickly recognized that he can’t keep them.⁷ It was C. S. Lewis who reportedly said, “it was not until I tried to clean-up my life that I finally realized how truly sinful I was.”

⁶ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 365.

⁷ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 328.

Jesus reveals that the young man's zeal is misplaced and his great confidence in his own righteousness is at the end of the day, nothing but self-deception. As Mark recounts in verse 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.'*" Jesus was obviously moved by what was taking place before him. Mark says that Jesus loved him, a remarkable expression. Here was one of Israel's finest sons, who has not a clue about the kingdom of God, or what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus' answer is not cruel (as it may seem), rather he is speaking the truth in love. He tells the young man that he has not done enough. He must sell everything, give it to the poor and then follow Jesus all the way to the cross, if he is to gain eternal life. In effect, Jesus is opening the ground under the man's feet. This young man must see that like everyone else he is not a law-keeper, but a law-breaker. If only the young man will acknowledge this, he will receive what really matters—not earthly riches, but all the treasures of heaven. But where Jesus leads, he will not follow. The cost is too high.

The man's response is utterly tragic. "*At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*" Jesus knew all along what the others watching this did not. Mark now reveals that this man had great wealth, thereby exposing the fact that this man loved his possessions more than eternal life and the kingdom of God. Let us be clear here. Jesus is not establishing a general principle that rich people must sell off all their possessions to be saved, or that people who do end up giving everything away to the poor, somehow qualify themselves for entrance into the kingdom. Jesus knows this man's heart and his specific circumstances. Jesus says this to him because he knows this man's situation and has just heard this man place complete confidence in his own righteousness. Jesus has just exposed the fact that this man who thinks of himself as a law-keeper, is not willing to place God ahead of everything else, after all. The young man will not cast aside everything to find eternal life. When push comes to shove he won't do what Jesus requires of him. The grim reality is that he is a law-breaker. He is also a sad law-breaker who has just traded away all the riches of heaven in order to keep his own personal wealth. Some have noted that the man's sadness is actually a good sign. Jesus' verbal barb has stuck, and we don't know what happened to this man later on. But we do read that Jesus loved him.⁸

Seeing the reaction on the part of his disciples, Jesus must explain to them how God's kingdom must be bestowed upon people who can do nothing to save themselves. The young man who approached Jesus seemingly had all of the qualifications to enter. He was sincere and zealous. He was extremely pious and did his best to conform his life to the demand of the law. And he was wealthy, a sign of God's favor. If anyone could enter the kingdom because of human achievement it was this man. But as we read in verses 23-25, "*Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!' The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.'*" In an age in which people saw riches as a sign of God's blessing, hence of his favor, once again, Jesus' words shocked everyone. According to Jesus, wealth can be a hindrance to entering the kingdom, because wealth can cause someone to rely upon human achievement.

That is Jesus' whole point. The kingdom of God has nothing to do with earthly status, whether one be rich (and preoccupied with wealth), or poor (who are identified in the Old Testament as being close to heart of God).⁹ The kingdom is not gained, it is received. Being rich does not qualify one for entrance.

⁸ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 331.

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 369.

Being poor does not disqualify one from entrance. Being sinners disqualifies all of us from entrance! Being proud and trusting in our own righteousness makes us unworthy, no matter how much money we may have. In fact, says Jesus, entering the kingdom is very hard. It is easier for the largest animal in Palestine (a camel) to go through the smallest opening (the eye of a needle), than it is for a rich person (like the rich young ruler) to enter the kingdom. Unlike children, who simply receive what God gives, the rich young man thought he could do what Jesus required and went away sad when Jesus set the bar higher than he was willing to go.

And so Mark tells us in verse 26, *“The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’”* Finally they get it. Now, they understand Jesus’ point. Men and women cannot save themselves! Using the commandments of God, Jesus has driven them to despair. If obedience to the commandments cannot do it, if zeal and sincerity cannot do it, if riches mean nothing, then no one can be saved. Exactly! We do not have it with our power to save ourselves.

But there is a God-given solution to the problem of human sin, and that is that what God demands of us under the law (and that is, perfect obedience), he freely gives us in the gospel. Just as soon as the disciples say “uncle,” “who can be saved?” Jesus gives them the solution in verse 27. *“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’”* Here is God’s answer to the fundamental human predicament. If men and women are sinful and cannot earn entrance into the kingdom of God, all they need to do is acknowledge that this is the case. If they try and gain entrance into the kingdom through good works, through riches, through status, through piety, God says “no.” If people throw up their hands and say, “alright, I cannot save my self,” God says “receive the kingdom like a little child.” With these words, Jesus has just turned all other forms of religion upside down. Unless the kingdom is received as the free gift that it is, men and women cannot enter it. But if rich people, poor people, people of great-standing, people of low standing, simply admit that they cannot save themselves, God grants them entrance because he is merciful.

Good old Peter. He has just seen the rich man walk away from Jesus heartbroken because he would not leave his riches behind. And so in verse 28 he blurts out, *“We have left everything to follow you!”* In other words, we did what the rich man wouldn’t do, because we trusted in your promise to save us. We walked away from everything. Jesus now gently tells Peter that he’s missing the point and that despite what is yet to come, God will reward all those who renounce their own righteousness to follow Jesus. *“I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, ‘no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.’”* Indeed says Jesus, *“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* Despite all appearances to the contrary, Jesus will make good on his promise. He has reversed the order of things, at least in terms of how sinful men and women understand salvation. Those who leave all to follow Jesus will be first. Those who hold on to their claim upon God, and seek to be rewarded because of their deeds, will be in for a huge disappointment. They will not inherit eternal life. They are last.

What then, do we say by way of application?

The rich young man asks one of the most important questions anyone can ever ask—“what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus’ answer to him—“sell all you have and give it to the poor”—along with his explanation, “with men salvation is impossible, but with God all things are possible,” clearly demonstrates the difference between Christianity and all other religions. In every other religion when the question is asked, “what must I do to be saved,” the answer is some sort of list of things to be done,

ceremonies to be performed, pilgrimages to be made, or even to intensely focus within. And having done these things, one is then supposedly ready and qualified for the hereafter. Not so with Christianity.

Notice that Jesus gives the man a list of things—the commandments. And when the man claims to have done them all, Jesus then exposes how he had actually fulfilled none of them. This young man—despite his piety and zeal—had placed his wealth above love of God and desire to be saved. And while his hands were clean, his heart was filled with sin. It was because Jesus loved this man that he used the law to crush him to send him away downcast. The law had done its work—pride had given way to despair. Now the young man was ready to hear the gospel. That is how Christianity differs from all other religions. God says “no, you can’t,” to our “yes I can.” But when we say, “I know I can’t, but will you?” then God says “Yes, I alone can do this for you.” Whether this rich young man came to faith or not is never revealed.

When the disciples finally figure out that it is impossible for anyone of us to be saved based on our good works, our social status, our riches, or our power, they have had another major breakthrough, every bit as significant as when it was revealed to them that Jesus is the Christ. And having thrown up their hands in complete despair—“then who can be saved?” they are finally ready to listen to Jesus when he tells them that with men this is impossible.

The only way for anyone to enter the kingdom of God is to come to that point of realization, when you understand that you can do nothing, and when you cease all pretenses, and when you simply say, “Lord, I will receive that free gift that you offer to me, namely, the merits of Jesus Christ, which are sufficient to save even the worst of sinners.” That is what Jesus meant when he said that unless we receive the kingdom as a child, we will never enter it. That is what Jesus meant when he said, with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

That is what God expects of us today. Surrender all hope of self-salvation. Seek from God the free gift of the forgiveness of your sin and the perfect righteousness of Jesus. Then, you will indeed be saved from your sins, and become the heir to a treasure that far exceeds anything that we can imagine, namely, life eternal. Amen.