

Camels and Needles: The dynamics of Salvation

Mark 10:17-31

Last week we talked about Jesus' welcoming the children and telling his disciples that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless one becomes a little child. Let me just remind you that the kingdom of God is not necessarily that place we call heaven. While heaven is part of it, it actually begins here. It is a condition that we begin to experience in this life. Once we yield to the kingship of God in our lives, that's the time we become a part of God's kingdom. There can only be a kingdom if there is a ruler and there are people who are subject to that ruler's rule. The Kingdom of God can be rightly referred to as what we would commonly call "salvation" or "eternal life."

In our text this morning we find a rich young man struggling with this question. He knew something was lacking, he knew something was missing in his life, and so he went to see the good teacher.

¹⁷As 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?"

Jesus' response to this question, leads us to learn more about what salvation is about. And the first dynamic or principle we find here is this:

1. Salvation cannot be earned

¹⁹You 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.'" ²⁰"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Salvation is not about following the different "thou shall nots" or "thou shall dos." The rich young ruler was a successful follower of the law. This was a feat in itself! Oh my, he had all the ingredients he had all what it takes to disregard the law. Well, he was young—and when you're young you're more reckless, you tend not to worry about consequences. But he was not like that! He was rich—he had the resources to bend the rules. But he didn't do that! He was in a position of power, but he did not abuse that. Therefore following the law was a feat or an accomplishment in itself. But the young man knew that it wasn't enough. He knew something was missing in his life. He wouldn't have gone to Jesus if he had that sense of fulfillment in the first place.

Believe it or not. I used to be an eagle scout back in my high school days. That's the highest rank a Boy Scout can hope to accomplish. But in order to get to that stage you have to earn a certain number badges that represent different skills. For every skill you get to accomplish, you earn this small round embroidered badge, and this patch goes to your sash. Once you get enough badges, well you get to be an eagle scout. And you get this shiny medal for it. So I wore that medal along with the badges because I earned them. I was part of an elite club.

But salvation does not work that way. It's not about our merits. It's neither about the good things we do nor the badges we earn in life. Why? Because if salvation is about what we can

accomplish, then we can brag about it—we have bragging rights. But salvation is a result of grace. It is a gift from God. Salvation is not about what we do for God but what God does for us. It is grace. Paul got it right when he said in Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Since salvation is grace, what would it take to have it? It is this second principle.

2. Salvation entails death

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."*

It was wealth that defined the young man. Remember, he was called the “rich young man.” Even the Mark doesn’t know his name, but he is clear about this young man’s status. His status in life—that he was rich. But Jesus “loved him” and therefore he had to tell him that which would help him. He told him to surrender the very thing that defined him. What was the one thing that mattered most to him? Well it was his wealth. If you take away his wealth then he is no longer the rich young ruler. In essence Jesus was calling this young man into a change of priorities—to change his life—Jesus was calling him to die. “Sell everything you have. Convert your possessions into cash, and give the cash to the poor and then follow me.”

Sometimes we focus too much about the issue of wealth here. But focusing too much on that we fail to realize that we too can be in many ways like this rich young man. We may not be rich or powerful like him but what are the things we value the most in our lives? What are the things we possibly value more over what God has to offer to us? What is it that keeps us from experiencing that eternal life? It can be attitude, it can be pride, it can be many things...

That thing that Jesus asked was a test in way. It’s very similar to that of Abraham when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac at Mt. Moriah. But did God allow Abraham to do it? No! God proved that he was willing to give up anything even his very own son. The rich young man knew that he needed something more, but he wasn’t willing to pay the price.

Once upon a time there was a chicken and a pig who stumbled upon an announcement posted in church about giving donations for a nearby town that was badly hit by a calamity. The chicken was kinda bothered by the announcement so he said to his friend: You know pig, I think I’m going to lay some eggs and donate them to these poor people. How about you? Why don’t you give your ham? Then the pig looked him in the eye and in great bewilderment said: “What???? Well, that’s so easy for you to say. Yes, you can give your eggs for the rest of your life, but if I give my ham, that means I would have to die.”

The famous German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*” Jesus essentially called the rich young man to die. So what happened to the young man when Christ challenged him to die to himself? Well according to Mark, his face “fell. He went away sad.” Then Jesus said this Aramaic hyperbole in v.23-24.

²³ *“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”* ²⁴*The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

Essentially Jesus knew that what he was asking from the rich young man was very hard. He knew that it was even harder than squeezing a camel through the eye of needle. And so his disciples were even more amazed and asked, ²⁶ *“Who then can be saved?”*

3. Salvation is empowerment

Yes, the disciples were right to ask, who then can be saved. It seems that self-denial or the act of dying to self is difficult to follow. Famous playwright Oscar Wilde even said that “Self denial is the shining sore on the leprous body of Christianity.” Wilde understood self-denial as a that big letdown in Christianity—it is what made Christianity, for Wilde, very difficult to practice. But is it really that hard? For Jesus, however, it was apparently not,

²⁷*Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”*

Church, Jesus was essentially telling his disciples that on their own, self-denial is impossible. But if you add God to the equation, it is possible to die to yourself. It is possible to leave all and give everything to the poor. Take note of the phrase “with God.” Yes we make the decision, but let us allow God to empower us to do the things that are seemingly impossible for us.

This is what John Wesley called prevenient grace. You will always hear me say this. Prevenient grace is that grace of God that comes before us. God places that grace before us so that by that grace we can do that which is being required of us. This grace is always present in every process we go through in that whole economy of salvation. From that early spark in our hearts to discipleship—God’s prevenient grace has always been there guiding us every step of the way.

It was grace that touched the young man’s heart to seek out Jesus, But he wasn’t willing to allow that grace to take him to the next level. He wasn’t willing to cross that line from that of being a fan of Christ to being a full-pledged follower of Christ.

Church, remember this, when God asks us to do something, God is not going to leave us alone on our own. When God asks us to do something, God is calling us to partner with him. God is calling us to partner with him in making possible that which is impossible. It seems impossible to give up things to follow Christ but with God’s empowerment, everything is possible. Would you partner with God to change your life today? Let us pray.

Gracious God, today we come to you and see how in many ways are we like that rich young. Forgive us for trying to work our way to attain that eternal life that you have promised. We now know that something is missing in our lives and yet we are not willing to pay the price. We are willing to hear and listen and yet we are not willing to make that next important step. Lord, help us to make that decision. Empower us to deny ourselves, to die in ourselves and follow you. Help us to partner with you. Help us to experience eternal life. Amen.