

## Hope for the Impossible

*Luke 18:18-30*

*"Then who can be saved? But He said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."*

### Introduction:

When first starting out in ministry as a 18 year old college student, there was a mixture of idealistic hope and grandiose desire to reach out to younger people with the truth of the gospel. I joined the youth staff of Grace Baptist church and began to meet with a group of young men that I'd mentor for the next three years. As is customary, we would run summer camps where we'd have scores of kids come to compete, play, and hear God's Word proclaimed. One camp in particular sticks out vividly in my mind. Walter Crutchfield (who some of you know and who looked a lot like Garth Brooks) gave a convicting and challenging message about the realities of life and death, sin and judgment. We offered to meet with kids afterward who wanted to talk about a commitment to Christ. I met with a young man who came from a broken home, a broken life, and who wept with me that night over his sin and desire to follow Christ. He felt good, and I felt like God had used me as an instrument.

But we knew this young man needed more so we began a process of discipleship, knowing that camp highs can be emotional and perhaps not based in reality. We met weekly, he'd hang out in the dorms with college students who took him under their wing, picked him up multiple times a week to be with the church, and talked through a myriad of issues. As time went on however, his interest waned, he began to miss times together, and got involved in relationships in high school that moved him away from God and into a life of self-driven sin. There came a point where I didn't see him anymore, nor have I seen him since.

Have you ever had this kind of experience. Part of me wanted to go back and stop at the point where he was tearful and desirous of Christ at camp, and not do anything after that. We'd all feel better that God worked, the story would have been great, and the reality would not have to be faced. But it also led to many questions. Was he *saved* but now was simply struggling? Was he never saved? Did I fail? Was there something else I could've/should've done? Some of my idealism was chiseled away at that time as I began to realize that true conversion is truly something only God can do, since I have no power to convince, love someone enough, or nice someone into repentance and following Jesus. It is something **impossible without God, and only possible with Him.**

That turned me back to God's Word to passages like the one we will read this morning. *How did Jesus do it?* If He is the master teacher and evangelist, how did he approach people who wanted to follow Him? How did He "seal the deal", "close the transaction", or get someone to pray the right prayer? What I found was something radically different than what I would have thought and that profoundly changed my thinking in how we approach others in presenting the gospel and how we view conversion.

### The Man with the Impossible Question (18)

**Luke 18:18** And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

#### His makeup and motive

We are introduced to a new character approaching Jesus. He had been teaching against the Pharisees and to His disciples and had been using **parables** to illustrate meaning. This is not a parable but a real interaction. This story is recorded by each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31), which not only shows its importance, but also gives us a full formed picture of this interaction. This was

not an argumentative, competitive, or tense interaction like with the Pharisees, but a compassionate and loving one with a genuinely deceived seeker. What do we know about him?

- **He was the guy all moms would want their daughter to marry** - This was a young man, which meant he was in his 20's or 30's and was not as hardened as the Pharisees who could only question or try to trap Jesus. He was a **ruler**, which meant he either had a civil magistrate position or one in the synagogue. Either way, each of these carried prestige with it. To accomplish this at an early age meant he was hard working, respected, moral (kept the Law), proactive, and his question to Jesus was out of sincerity, desire, and honesty. On top of this, he was **filthy rich**, so that was a nice bonus on top of his proven character (I'm not saying this is a pre-requisite to courting my daughter's, but it wouldn't hurt)
- **He was still missing something after having everything** - Even with all of this, there was something missing. The text right before this is Jesus explaining that the Kingdom of God had to be **received like a child**. Perhaps he had never heard that, or that caused some question to his eternal reality, but something was missing. He did not have **true assurance or the fullness of joy** that comes from yielding ones life to Christ completely. So He approaches Jesus with an honest and earnest question.

### Nature (and normative makeup) of the question

- **Pre-Evangelism already done** - In laying out the realities of the gospel, we often engage in **pre-evangelism**: a loving relationship, establishment of God, who He is, what He expects, who Jesus is and what He did. To truly understand the meaning of redemption and forgiveness, these important issues have to be established (now, these can also be established quickly and don't necessarily take long periods of time). This man already knew who God was, knew about the Law, understood the concept of eternal life, and believed Jesus was the path to get there. It would seem this man was ready to be converted.
- **Asked the question that everyone asks at some point (whether they say it or not)** - He asked the longing question that is truly in everyone's heart and on everyone's mind, regardless is they can explain it. Romans 1 says we are created with a knowledge of God (1:18-19) and with the law written in our hearts that convicts us (2:15-16) which though we may suppress it and excuse it, there is a longing to be made right with God. The **problem** is we ask the right question with the **wrong** source. We look to ourselves, what we can do, what we can fix to make ourselves acceptable to God. We believe salvation or eternal life is a rope ladder we can hoist ourselves up to and climb to heaven, not realizing that it is only when we get to the end of our rope that we realize it is only through a cross that salvation is found.

### The Answer and Response to the Impossible Question (19-22)

**Luke 18:19-22** And Jesus said to him, "**Why do you call me good?** No one is good except God alone."<sup>20</sup> You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'"<sup>21</sup> And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth."<sup>22</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

### Expectations of eternal life

Jesus loved the man (Mark 10:21) and so engaged Him in a conversation to reveal his heart. Notice that Jesus did not give him *new or more information*, nor did He call him to believe. Instead he **challenged what the man already believed** and helped him understand what was missing in his view of life.

- **Challenging terms** - It is debated why the man called Jesus good: was he buttering Him up, or was he being cordial but not understanding the actual word, or did he believe Jesus was who He said he was. Jesus did not disagree with his statement, but challenged what he meant, since only God is good. This is important for us as we interact with people. We must clarify terms now more than ever. Words like God, Jesus, sin, joy, love, acceptance, and judgment all must be clarified in order to make sure we are telling the truth in a clear way.
- **Used the Law to reveal need** - Notice that Jesus did not start with the 1st commandment (love the Lord your God with all your heart), but instead with the 7, 6, 8, 9, and 5, all having to do with relationships with others. These were used to make it abundantly clear that he did not and could not keep the ultimate command. The Law was given NOT as a means of righteousness, but as a means of driving God's people back to Him for righteousness. The proper response to Jesus' statement should have been a deep sigh and admission of failure at the outset of each Law. He had never murdered, but had he held hatred? He had never outwardly spoken against his parents, but had he ever disobeyed them (even once) or held them in contempt? He had never robbed a store, but had he taken anything that wasn't his, even in his youth? The answer is: **of course he had!** We have all broken God's Law, many times, and even if he **had** kept himself from violating one or a few, **James 2:10 says** that if you fail at one point of the Law you are accountable for it ALL.

### Misplaced understanding of personal accomplishment -

But this was not his response. We can almost feel his disappointment as the answer Jesus gave to the key to eternal life was not only what he always believed, it was what he had lived out. His statement "**all these I have kept from my youth**" was a sincere statement, since he was a moral, good man. But honesty and sincerity do not save. He was highly deceived by his own goodness and righteousness, thinking that he had earned a place with God. So Jesus **ramped up the stakes to reveal his heart, driving him toward a decision.**

Jesus had been adamant that **works cannot save**, but the cost of following Him to the kingdom and salvation would cost everything. In fact He had already described that discipleship is a commitment to **deny self** (self trust for righteousness), **take up our cross** (follow Him in death), and follow Him. The New Testament reiterates the call to follow Jesus **requires death**: We are buried with Him by baptism into death...in order that we might be raised into life (Rom. 6:4), we have been crucified with Him and now we live by faith (Gal. 2:20), we have put to death what is earthly in us (Col. 3:5), and share in His sufferings to be like Him in His death (Phil. 3:10). Salvation is a call to die, and that is exactly what Jesus was driving at by His call to give all he had to the poor. This man's issue was NOT that he did not believe in God, the **problem was he served another one**. He struggled with **idolatry**, trusting money more than God, and Jesus confronted him at his core because that is where change truly needed to happen. He could not follow Jesus until he rid himself of the idol of money, because Jesus demands complete allegiance. That is why this is NOT a command given to everyone for conversion. but particularly for this young man. It drove a stake in his heart and caused him to choose.

### NOTE 2 HUGE PRINCIPLES:

- **Jesus presentation of the gospel goes against much contemporary ideology** - Jesus could have told this man to do just about *anything*, and he would have done it. He would have given money to the ministry. He would have served, sang, and even greeted. He would have prayed a prayer, sat through a lecture, even taken a class. Often we think that if we can only get people **in**, they will somehow change. We only want to talk about God's love, a belief in Him, and His willingness to accept and forgive us, but are we willing to follow Jesus' example and make sure people know their sinfulness?
- **Idolatry keeps people from the Kingdom** - Most sins are overt: adultery, lying, stealing, etc. Idolatry is a sin of the heart, subtle and easily hidden and easily deceiving. Salvation is a shift of loyalty, and God does not play seconds. We live in a time where people want to **ADD Jesus to their life, keeping the parts they love, taking Jesus and all He offers, as long as the two never collide**. Following Jesus is a submission to His Lordship, meaning all other idols die, and continue to die throughout our life.

### The Disappointment and Explanation of why the Impossible (23-25)

**Luke 18:23-25** But when he heard these things, **he became very sad**, for he was **extremely rich**.<sup>24</sup> Jesus, looking at him with sadness, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"<sup>25</sup> For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

#### Sad reality of a hard choice (*especially for the rich*)

What started as a hopeful discourse collided into a sad conclusion. The young man hit a crossroad, one path leading to life eternal following Jesus, leaving the life he knew behind, along with all the financial security and respect he had known behind. The other was to return to the comfort of his good life, resting in what he knew and calling that "enough". The text makes it profusely clear: his idol was his extreme wealth, and he chose this over following Jesus. Now before throwing this man under the bus and calling out his foolishness, let's take a look at how money in particular can be a stumbling block for all people, including those who live in Southern California and have more than they need each day:

- Riches cause us to be **self-reliant**, trusting ourselves in the ability to make money and fix any problem with our money (over trusting the Lord)
- Riches cause us to have misplaced **identity and value** - We judge our self worth, goodness, and who we are (and others) based on how much we have, rather than who we are in Christ
- Riches cause us to look down on others who do not have it
- Riches cause us to be **independent and self-glorifying**
- Riches cause us to believe what we have is **OURS**, not gifts of God's grace, and we have much to lose. We begin to think in terms of "mine" rather than His, clinging onto our house, possessions, and family to the detriment of trusting the Lord. This was easy when all I owned fit in my 1988 Chevy Cavalier. Its much more difficult when there are greater responsibilities and stewardships.

#### Difficulty of coming to grips with the impossible

After the man turned away from Jesus back to his wealth, Jesus used the opportunity to teach a **cautionary tale** to His disciples. In Jesus day, the belief was that **wealth was tied to God's blessing**, and poverty with God withholding it. That practically meant that "good people were rich", but poverty was caused by some besetting sin. Not only this, but the rich could **GIVE MORE**, reaping the benefits of giving money away, which was seen as the pinnacle of good works. **More was seen as better**. That is so

often the case in our culture, where the wealthy have influence even if they have no character to back it.

But Jesus told His disciples that far from a blessing, having more money was a **stumbling block** to the kingdom. Having more meant a greater possibility of missing out on the kingdom. Then Jesus gave the vivid picture of a camel (the largest animal in normal life of someone in Israel) going through the eye of a needle. If that sounds like a ridiculous analogy, its because it is. This was not something that could be done with great effort (all right, lets try some grease and ice cubes). It was something that is utterly impossible. Those who do not believe their own sinfulness and refuse to renounce their idols cannot be saved, because we cannot serve two masters.

### The Hope in the Midst of Impossible (26-30)

**Luke 18:26-30** Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" <sup>27</sup> But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." <sup>28</sup> And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." <sup>29</sup>

And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup> who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."

#### Sovereign grace in the impossible

This left the disciples flustered. If this man, the Mary Poppins of salvation candidates (practically perfect in every way), then who **could be saved????!!!!??** If a moral, sincere, respected man could not get there, and if the rich are out too, is this all a lost cause?! To this question Jesus gave a profound, simple, and direct answer: ***What is impossible with men is possible with God!***

Salvation in Christ is fundamentally antithetical to our self trusting and self reliant minds. This is why people get caught into thinking that the gospel is foolish and unable to actually change people. But this statement by Jesus is exactly what we celebrate at Christmas. When an angel visited a 14 year old girl and told her that she would conceive a child while maintaining her virginity, and a sign of comfort to her would be that her old, past her prime cousin had also conceived a son though barren, he concluded with **"for nothing will be impossible with God."** (Luke 1:35-37). Mary's response of faith and trust in God came simply as **"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word."** This was as profound as the angels announcement.

Salvation is impossible apart from God's intervention. We cannot coax or coerce people into the kingdom. One of the most confusing parts of the story is that Jesus let this young man leave, much like the story of the younger brother in the story of the Prodigal God. All that the Father has given His son are His (John 10:22-30), and those who do not believe are not part of His flock. Salvation starts with a proper knowledge of God, believing in Jesus by faith, that He lived, died, and rose again. But this story is clear that we must be driven to **repentance**, a turning from self and idols to follow Christ and submit to His Lordship. This not only secures life eternally, but also helps us live out eternal life now: **"And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."** (John 17:3)

#### Sovereign reward for those who embrace the impossible

Peter spoke up and reiterated the actions and belief of he and his fellow disciples: they *HAD* left everything to follow Him. Jesus did not rebuke him since this was not a pride driven statement, but one that was calling for affirmation. Instead, Jesus obliged and reminded His own that there is no one who has left everything to follow Jesus who will not gain in this life and the life to come. NOTE: This does not mean we violate other commands given, like taking care of our family and children. This is not a call to DO radical things to prove our love and commitment, but to look at life in a radically different way. We

no longer hold onto things as our own, but realize that ALL belongs to Him, and He can do with them as He deems fit. If that means giving, so be it. If that means taking away, we bless the name of the Lord.

The question we must each answer: have I come to grips with my own sin, recognized my offense before a holy God, and repented of it, turning from my sin and self-trust to a loving God who died in my place. Have I recognized and repented of any and all idols in my life, those good things that have become ultimate things, taking the place of worship where only God belongs. Have we come to grips with the fact that the call to follow Christ means denying ourselves in this life to gain in the next?

That is how and why we celebrate communion this morning. We remember our sin, that Jesus poured out His blood on our behalf, giving His body to us. We remember our sin has been forgiven, that we have died, and that we are to put sin to death. We remember the Christ of Christmas who came as a baby but died as a King, a Savior in our place.

We also remember that we long to be with Him in His kingdom to come. By eating the bread and drinking from the cup we remember that this world is not our home, that there are glories to come as we long to be with Christ.