

Mark 10:17-27

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

October 17, 2021

Test-taking can be nerve-wracking. I'm not thinking so much of a regular test in school at the end of a unit but of something with big stakes. There is the driver's test at age sixteen, the determiner of mobility and independence. There are professional tests like the medical field for doctors and nurses. The bar exam for lawyers is the stuff of legends. Some people get so psyched out by major tests that their nerves prevent them from doing well. I knew a man who wanted to receive his high school diploma through the GED test but struggled with math. He studied, got tutored, retook it the maximum times allowed. Finally he gave up on his goal. That might be how we react to the question the disciples posed in today's text regarding salvation.

### IS THERE ANY HOPE?

The answer is (I.) no—if you trust yourself. A man came to Jesus as he and his disciples were traveling onward. He was eager to reach the Savior with his question, as he was running. The parallel accounts in other gospels call him a young man, using a term that designated someone age 24-40. They also reveal he was a synagogue ruler, someone respected to oversee the activities of their combined church and school. He had a serious interest in matters spiritual and showed honor to Jesus by kneeling before him. He addressed the Savior as "good teacher." I take that as a sincere form of address, not an attempt at flattery to receive a favorable answer. Jesus didn't object but wanted him to ponder his use of the adjective "good." "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone." He was not quarreling with the term but asking if the man recognized the full impact of what he had just said. Jesus was 100% good. In fact, he was sinless and holy. He was the only truly good one, God in person on this earth with a mission to redeem the world from sin.

The young man had come to the right source but with only a half-right question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He asked about inheriting eternal life. That is the correct way to view it. It is a gift from a loving and gracious heavenly Father by the work of Jesus. We don't line ourselves up for it but merely receive it. At the same time there was an error in what he asked. "What must I *do*...?" That sounds like work, earning something. It's a natural feeling because we've been taught the attitude, "There's no such thing as a free lunch." If you want something good, get busy and put forth effort. This fellow had been doing just that. He

seems upstanding and well-regarded, the type every mother would welcome as a son-in-law. Perhaps he felt he needed a bit more, thus the question.

He had come to a wrong conclusion about himself. Jesus reviewed several commandments from the Second Table of the Law, those dealing with our treatment of our neighbor. His response, "All these I have kept since I was a boy." "I've been doing it all my life." It sounds familiar as I've heard people claim to be doing well on living rightly. "I've got a good start. Haven't murdered anybody, cheated on my wife or stolen anything. So I've kept at least three of the commandments. That's a lot better than many other people I can name. So God must be pleased with me."

You and I know that's not the case. It takes a superficial view of the standards. God sees also our thoughts and the attitudes of our hearts. He does not just look for us to avoid doing wrong but also wants us to do good to others. Be kind and helpful. Have you done so all the time, with no lapses? Maybe this fellow's behavior was truly upright and honorable, that he was not a braggart. Jesus didn't argue or point out ways he hadn't done so.

But he did know something that was not what it seemed or what he thought about himself. He called for a test by action, not just something theoretical or learned from a book. "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.'" His words were not a snarky putdown. Mark reported that Jesus loved him. He sincerely cared about his soul. The young man failed the test. "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth." It was too much to ask. He went away, not to sell and share but to leave Jesus. He had great wealth and he loved it. He was not willing to part with it. In reality, he hadn't kept the First Commandment, which calls for us to love God more than anyone or anything else. His possessions were most important. Love for God is not only to be first but is basic to the rest of the commandments. Recall Luther's catechism explanations for the others all begin, "We should fear and love God that we ..."

The conclusion that we must all come to when we are faced with God's law and its demands is that we haven't kept them. We cannot do so. Relying on our own merit will not reach first base, much less heaven. When we ask, "Is there hope?" the answer is, "Not if you trust in yourself."

II.

The same answer comes as we continue to listen to Jesus: "(2) No—if you trust riches." He gave further elaboration to illustrate important truths. First there was the general statement, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" That exclamation brought wonder to the minds of the disciples. He repeated the thought, then added, "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." A needle is small; a camel is big. There is no way it will fit through that tiny slit. You can warm the needle to try to expand the metal opening. You can put your camel on a strict diet or use a baby camel. It still doesn't work.

I find threading a needle a difficult enough task. During my vicar year I was on my own for domestic tasks. I was OK with cooking and I did dishes at least every third day when there weren't any more clean ones, but then a button fell off the sleeve of a suit coat. My mom had always taken care of mending items, but I was over four hundred miles away from her. I went a few weeks without wearing that suit but eventually wanted to. So I dedicated a Sunday afternoon to the project. Eventually I got the needle threaded and sewed the button back on. It took about two hours. The next time I lost a button I bought a device that used plastic fasteners. So I understand the message about a needle.

Why is it so difficult for the rich to be saved? We all tend to rely on earthly possessions. Money talks. With it you can buy favors and influence. How about with God? Even if you're not crass enough to think you can buy your way into heaven, as you do good with your wealth, you may think that merits some payback or reward from him. It will get you no further than the young man's upright life. You are still not perfect as God's law requires.

Riches easily direct our attention to earthly matters and away from our spiritual life. We get all wrapped up in enjoying this life and the advantages it offers. That becomes our sole purpose for existing. If that's why you're living, money has become your god, an idol you have created in your heart. You may start treating people who are less well off as ones to be used for self-service, which is what Amos condemned the wealthy for doing in today's Old Testament reading.

So does this warning about the rich indicate being poor gives you a ticket to heaven? Don't be too quick to think so. Money can be a problem for the poor also. In fact, most of us would not consider ourselves rich, although we would be considered so compared with most of the world. However much we have, these words of Jesus carry a pertinent message. If you are just eking out a living there is the danger with so much attention given to your survival that money becomes just

as important to you as it is to the rich. We may envy those who are better off. We might try to obtain wealth in improper ways like cheating and stealing. It becomes an obsession for us. Or we think those with more owe us a living. Wealth is a problem for all levels of economic well-being. Ask anyone how much they need and the answer is always, "a little more than I have." Let's all take to heart these words of warning from the Lord Jesus.

### III.

Good people, bad people. Rich people, poor people. It's hard to enter the kingdom of God. Is there any hope? (III.) Yes—because God does the impossible. The disciples were blown away by these words of Jesus. During their time with him they had heard many startling teachings. Remember how a couple weeks ago he told us to cut off our hand if that would prevent us from stealing? This statement filled them with dismay. "Who then can be saved?" It was looking like there was no hope for anyone. That's exactly what Jesus wanted them to see. Nothing we have or are or can do will save our soul.

That's where Jesus fits in. "Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'" God sent his Son. It is impossible for a virgin to conceive and for a divine being to become human, but God made it happen. Mary gave birth to Jesus, who was true God and true man in one being.

The debt of sin accumulated by the world was too great. No payment we could offer was sufficient to remove it. A single sin merits an eternity of suffering in hell. Jesus offered the required payment on the cross, all compacted into those hours he hung there. He was able to do that because he was God. His sacrifice got rid of the bad stuff on our record. Heaven calls for holiness. Jesus supplied that also with his sinless life. These truths blow us away as much as the teaching about the difficulty of the rich being saved, only in a good way, not destroying hope.

God has done the impossible for you and me still. He offers forgiveness and all the blessings that go with it by faith, but we have no powers to believe in our spiritual deadness. He brings us to realize it is impossible and to give up on ourselves. Then he sends the Holy Spirit with the good news of Jesus and his work and his love for us. That gospel message brings us to faith. All is not hopeless. Immense joy is ours. Yes, there is hope. In fact, we have more than hope. We have certainty based on our Savior and his work for us.

He continues to do the impossible. As he fills our hearts, he transforms our lives. We use our wealth to bring blessings. Think of Bible figures like Abraham, who

had great riches. Or Joseph of Arimathea, who provided the tomb for Jesus' burial. Possessions became not a hindrance to their faith but a way to benefit others. Likewise we share with others in need and support gospel outreach, which brings the message of eternal life to needy souls. God does not ask us to sell everything we have but to use our treasures, as well as our time and talents to his glory.

Back to the question of the disciples: "Who then can be saved?" The answer is everyone. God loves all. Jesus came for all. He did it all; he calls all to faith. Is there any hope? Absolutely! Trust in Jesus.