



This morning we continue the series of messages that will take us through the month of March and into Easter. The title of the series is *What Faith Can See*. In this series I am speaking about passages in the gospels that demonstrate how difficult it was for the disciples and others to understand the words and actions of Jesus, and how difficult it can be for us as well.

Today we come to a well-known passage from the gospel of Luke. In a recent article in the *Cup*, I wrote about this passage, and at the time thought it should be developed into a sermon. If you read the *Cup* article, you can consider that an introduction to Sunday's message.

Follow along with me as we read the passage.

Luke 18:18-27 –

18 *A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

19 *"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone.*

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 *"All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.*

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

23 *When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.*

24 *Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!*

25 *Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."*

26 *Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”*

27 *Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”*

First of all, how many of you have been troubled by this story, and its implications about money and wealth? Have you wondered how much of your wealth and possessions to give away? How many have wondered if this passage teaches that having money makes it impossible to gain salvation? Or maybe you decided you don't have to worry because you aren't wealthy. Considering the fact that the majority of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day, we are the wealthy. Generally speaking, we tend to have a more narrow vision about many issues, seeing them only in relation to our own nation, when we should be thinking on a global scale, certainly in relation to resources. In recent years, we have heard much discussion about the “1%,” that is, those who populate the very top echelon of the economic scale. You will most likely be surprised then to discover that, on a global scale, you might be a member of the 1%. If your annual income is \$50,000 a year, you are a member of the 1%. If you earn \$50,000 a year you are in the top .31% of wage earners in the world and rank 18,652,583 worldwide. If you earn \$75,000 a year you are in the top .11% and are ranked 6,645,709. If you earn \$100,000 a year you are in the top .08% and rank 5,067,405 (www.globalrichlist.com).

Secondly, you might have heard a well-known explanation about the meaning of the words of Jesus that *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God* (verse 25). There is a well-known interpretation for that verse that is wrong. Absolutely wrong. I understand that sounds like a bold statement, but this passage is about one topic more than anything else, and we'll get to that in a few minutes. The common interpretation for that verse is this – there was a gate in the wall around the city of Jerusalem that was shaped like the eye of a needle. A camel, or other beast of burden, that was fully loaded with goods could not pass through that gate until it had been relieved of its burden. In a similar way, we must divest ourselves of our dependency on wealth and riches in order to gain entrance to the kingdom of God. Have you heard this explanation?

If you have, put it out of your mind. Forget that interpretation. For one thing, there is no evidence such a gate ever existed in the wall around Jerusalem. Even if there was such a gate, why would anyone go to the trouble of unloading their animal, sending it through the gate, carry their goods through the gate, and then loading them back on the animal when there were many other gates in the city that were very large and through which they could enter with no difficulty? It's an interpretation that, for practical reasons, doesn't make any sense (and it also misses the point theologically). And though Jesus had plenty to say about money, wealth, possessions – and their attendant dangers – that is not the primary meaning of this passage.

Here is the meaning of this passage – *in this passage Jesus is teaching about God's grace, and the very important truth that God's grace is freely given to us*. That's it. A very simple, concise, and important point that Jesus made.

Let's back up to the beginning of the passage and walk through it. First, I would say that the man who comes to Jesus is the kind of person any church would love to have walk through their doors. He was a good person, he desired to be an even better person, and he had a lot of resources. He comes to Jesus, very genuinely seeking, I believe, an answer to a very important question – he wants to know how he might gain eternal life. Jesus answers his question by affirming the man's knowledge of, and adherence to the commandments. In reply, the man says he has kept those commandments since he was a boy. The man has, obviously, been a good, righteous, and conscientious person. He's the kind of person who deserved praise for his good life, but Jesus tells the man he is lacking one thing. Now, wouldn't you think that is really good news? Imagine, Jesus tells you that you are doing so well there is only one thing you are lacking in life. That's an excellent commentary on this man's life – he's only deficient in one area! But what a big deficiency it is, because Jesus then drops a bomb on him when he says, *sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.* This was a man who was wealthy, and Jesus challenged him to give it all away! Sell his real estate holdings, cash in his stocks and bonds, liquidate his retirement accounts, sell his coin collection, gather up all his loose change from under the cushions of his couch (and then sell the couch) – everything. He is to make himself destitute.

Does this strike you as unfair? It always seemed somewhat unfair to me, because it's not something Jesus asked of other people. Other wealthy people came to Jesus, but he didn't ask them to sell all they had and give away the proceeds. Because this was a good and sincere man, we sense some unfairness in what Jesus asks, so we invent qualities about the man to take the edge off the perceived unfairness. We say things such as, *well, he must have been very selfish and Jesus recognized this. He must have worshipped his money more than he was worshipping God so Jesus wanted to remove that barrier from his life. Jesus was testing him to see how much he really loved God.* If the test of loving God is selling all we have then I suspect we are all in danger of failing that test.

The deficiency in this man wasn't his wealth or his attitude about it; his real deficiency was in his theology and we see that deficiency in the question he asks – *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* The man's emphasis was on *do*, as though it was necessary for him to earn his salvation, when the reality was, he didn't have to *do* anything. To ask what one must *do* is to imply there is something we must *do* to earn the gift of God's grace, and we do not have to earn God's grace; it is a free gift that God gives to us.

Jesus wasn't being unfair to the man and he wasn't targeting him because he was rich. Jesus seized on this moment as an opportunity to teach an important lesson, and Jesus is not just targeting this man with the lesson; he is really targeting his disciples and everyone else who was listening. It's a lesson of such critical importance that Jesus makes his point in a very dramatic way. Jesus was simply laying out for the man what is required if one wants to try and earn their salvation.

What Jesus was saying is this – if that is how you want to approach salvation, by what you do, then here is what it you have to do. *What have you done? Ok, you have kept all the commandments; that's great, and is a good start, but if you want to go the route of working and earning your salvation, you've got to do better than that. In fact, if you want to earn your salvation you must achieve perfection so let me lay it out for you. You're doing well, but you can do better, so sell all you have and give the proceeds to the poor.*

Because we are Americans – who live in a culture that teaches us that we have to earn our way in life, that there is no free lunch, and everyone has to work for what they get in life – we might not be all that different from this man in the way that we think. As much as we talk about God's free gift of grace, I think it's hard for us to escape the idea that we have to *do* something to earn and to deserve our salvation, in spite of the fact that Jesus is teaching in this story about the reality that God's grace is freely given to us. That God's grace is a free gift is very difficult for us to truly comprehend, and as much as we talk about grace and as much as we speak of grace being a free gift, deep down we often believe we must do something to earn God's grace. Here is the truth, however – there is nothing we need to do in order to earn God's grace. Nothing. In fact, there is nothing we *can* do to earn God's grace, which is the point Jesus is making to everyone in and through this story.

Writing in Romans 4:4, Paul says that *when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.* In other words, if we trust in our own good works to earn us salvation, whatever good we do is only what we should have done in the first place. When we try to earn salvation, the standard is perfection, and when the standard is perfection, it is impossible to ever get far enough ahead on any scale of righteousness in order to earn salvation. And yet many people will continue to believe they must *do* some measure of good works in order to earn their salvation. If you don't believe you think that way, you probably exhibit it in at least one place – a funeral home. In fact, I have coined a phrase for what is often expressed in funeral homes – *funeral home theology.* I'm sure you have heard this – or perhaps, even said it – when you have paid a visit to a funeral home. At some point, during visitation, someone will invariably say about Uncle Joe or Aunt Jane, *I know where they are right now. They are in heaven, and I know why they are in heaven – because they were such a good person.* As kind as that instinct is – and as important as it is to affirm the goodness of someone's life – that is not at all accurate theology. No one is granted the gift of eternity because of their goodness; this is a gift that comes because of God's goodness and grace.

The reason Jesus tells the man he must sell all he owns is to drive home the point of free grace to his disciples. When Jesus says *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* notice the reaction he receives – *who then can be saved?* They had been told all their lives that if you are wealthy it is a sign of God's blessing and if you are that blessed you have also been given the gift of salvation. So to be told that a rich person couldn't enter the kingdom of God

was mind-blowing to them. Wealth and salvation went together. The statement of Jesus went against everything they had been taught. If a rich person couldn't be saved, who could? Everyone listening to Jesus that day had the same thought – if this guy can't make it to heaven what hope do any of the rest of us have?

And that's exactly what Jesus wanted them to think. He wanted them to think of it as an impossibility; he wanted them to think there was nothing they could do. His answer was *what is impossible with men is possible with God*. Jesus is saying it is impossible for people to earn God's grace and salvation. How do you earn what's freely offered? Salvation lies solely in the hands of God; it is not up to us to earn it through any amount of good works. Salvation is freely given.

The truth about salvation is this – you don't have to *do* anything. *Doing* something implies that it is in our power to earn the gift of salvation. Can I do enough good works? Is there a threshold of righteousness that I can achieve by being nice to people? Can I serve on enough church committees? Can I attend enough church services? Can I feed enough hungry people? Can I give away enough money? Can I help enough people across the street and be nice to enough kittens and puppies? We often think of salvation as having some kind of a graded scale and at some point we are good enough that we cross that threshold and earn our entrance to God's kingdom, but Jesus flatly rejects that kind of thinking in this passage. The point he is making is not about selling everything you have; it's about the truth that salvation is the free gift of God that is given to us without any need to earn it.

Have you ever known someone who has spent years trying to earn the love of another person? Over the years of my ministry, as I have listened to many people tell their stories, and one of the most common themes I hear is the sense that they are not loved by someone who is very important to them. It might be a child, perhaps, who doesn't feel loved or accepted by a parent. A husband or wife who doesn't feel loved by their spouse. A friend who does not feel loved by a friend. It's a sad thing to see, isn't it? A person feel unloved and they work and work and work, all in the hope they will be accepted and loved by that other person.

That is not how God works! We don't have to earn his love; it is already ours; he has already given his love to us. God is not watching us and saying *oh man, Dave was almost there. He only needed one more good deed this week. He was doing great until he found Bill's debit card and used it to buy a bunch of stuff at Guitar Center. And he could have left a better tip at lunch the other day, and he could have responded nicer to the driver who cut him off at that intersection. He was this close to earning my love and grace this week.*

This passage teaches us something else as well. This passage pokes a lot of holes in the belief that some people can look down upon others because they are so "good" and the others are so "bad." This passage reminds us we are all in the same condition, regardless of our moral achievements. I may conduct my life on a higher moral plane than others, but it doesn't mean anything in terms of salvation or in terms of God's love.

Being a moral person may make us a good citizen and a more productive member of society but it doesn't earn us salvation. That's not to say that being moral isn't good; I think we ought to be moral people, but we must realize salvation does not come from our personal morality but from God's grace. The tendency among religious people is that too often the goal becomes about being better than someone else, which is erroneous. Again, I am not saying we don't have to worry about being moral people; I'm saying the point of morality is not to make us feel better than others. This was the mistake of so many of the scribes, Pharisees and other religious leaders at the time of Jesus. Their emphasis on morality led to an insufferable pride because they believed themselves to be so much better than everyone else, and because they believed they were so much better than everyone else, they believed God loved them more than everyone else.

It's sad to think that our world conditions people to react with such suspicion about a free gift. The grace of God is free. We do not have to earn it and we do not have to be good enough in the eyes of anyone else to receive it. May we receive that grace with gratitude and share it with others!