

August 21, 2011

Can an American Be Saved?

Mark 10:17-27

INTRODUCTION

Can a person who comes into the world with comfort and health and food and upward social mobility, absolutely unheard of in ages past and in most places in the world today—can such a person who is so rich and spoiled that they don't even know that they're rich and spoiled—can such a person possibly hear the gospel and believe and be saved?

In order to answer this question we're going to have to do a little math.

- THERE IS ONE GOOD THING SEPARATING MAN FROM GOD
- ONE DANGEROUS THING ADDED TO ONE IMPOSSIBLE THING

The Big Idea is that it is impossible for the natural state of any human being to know the one thing we need to know and so be saved.

I was going to add to the Big Idea the words: "...and being an American doesn't help!" but the Big Idea was already lengthy so we will just point that out when we get there.

DOCTRINE

I. THERE IS ONE GOOD THING SEPARATING MAN FROM GOD

A) When 'Good Things' Blind Us to the Good

1. *And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him (17a).* Matthew twice calls this man "a young man" and it is clear that he is from the wealthy class. Yet this young man both **ran** and **knelt** before Jesus in full view of the public. You have to give this man two stars—one for zeal in approaching Jesus with the question he did and another for offering more honor to Jesus than most others. What was the question? He *asked him* "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (17b). But youthful zeal and passion and outward expressions of honor and even good questions are all perfectly natural things: no evidence whatsoever of a true spiritual awakening.

2. Now he calls Jesus **Good Teacher**, which is exactly what Jesus wanted to seize on, so pay careful attention: *And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone (18).* The emphasis here is on the meaning of the word “good,” not on the identity of Jesus, as Matthew makes clear by adding the words from another angle: “Why do you ask me about *what* is good? There is only one who is good” [19:17]. In other words, Jesus knows that the basic problem in this man’s thinking was a surface definition of “goodness” which shows up in how he thinks he has performed the Law.

3. He drives into the man’s heart with the **letters of the Law**: *You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother’” (19).* The order of the commands is not as important as the choice of commands. Do you notice that these make up what is called the second table of the Law? The Ten Commandments are divided into two tables. The first table is one through four, commanding man’s heart directly to God: worship no other god, worship no image, do not use the Lord’s name in vain and keep the Lord’s Day. The second table is five through ten, commanding that same heart to extend outward to our fellow man: honor father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness and do not covet [cf. Ex. 20:3-17]. So Jesus cites the second table, man’s relation to man: the easier to perform on the surface.

B) When ‘All These Things’ Keep Us from the One Thing

1. The young man went for the bait: *And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth” (20).* **All these things**—all *what* things? **Good** things, I am sure the young man would agree. But what makes these “good things” good? James tells us that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. **For he** who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder’” [2:10-11]. Do you see James’ reasoning? Whoever violates the Law once violates all of it forever—why? Because HE! There is a ‘He,’ a Person of ultimate worth reflected in the Law that makes its good commands good. Jesus’ next words give us our last piece of the puzzle.

2. *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him.* Jesus **loved him**, presumably on purpose! Who was this man? Was he elect? I have no idea because none of the Gospel accounts tell us. And that means that either one of two things is true: either this man had Jesus’ free, sovereign, underserved love set upon his heart and the Spirit would awaken him later; or, this man was the object of divine love because he was an image of God born to the race of Adam, and like

all people made in the image of God, there is something special there, something which God sees and values and loves. And whichever level of love we're talking about, what does Jesus do to prove this love for this particular man? He tells him the truth.

3. Having loved him, Jesus did what you do for people who you really care about: He *said to him*, “*You lack one thing (21a)*. Now I hope it's clear that this is not Jesus agreeing with the man: “Yeah, you're probably right. You have kept the Law in all of these areas since your youth.” He knew that the man hadn't kept the Law since he got up out of bed that morning. What Jesus was doing was teaching by object lesson. *One thing* only was needed to make his point, to put this man's heart to the test. The whole world turns on *one thing*. The meaning of life can be boiled down to *one thing*. And there is *one thing* that God made you for. The Psalmist says,

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple [Ps. 27:4].

There is one essentially good thing and one thing only. There is one thing keeping a sinner from God and it is the same one thing as the only thing that is good. You may say, “Wait a minute, I thought that there was one *bad* thing separating God and man—namely, sin!” That's right. And now we need to see that if we flip that coin over, and Jesus holds himself out against this man's supposed avoidance of sin, that there is an up-side to the “tails” of sin. What is sin after all? What if I told you that the definition of sin was to be missing one thing? Would you feel relieved as if I were telling you that even if you're missing this one thing, that's OK, because surely you have a bunch of other good things that will impress God?

4. And now the test reveals him: *go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (21)*. If this man would not give up everything for Jesus on the spot, then he had just broken all the commandments, starting with the first. The words **treasure in heaven** let us know that leveling the economic field between this rich man and the poor that he would give his money to wasn't Jesus' point. The contrast was between ‘treasure in heaven’ and the treasure on earth that he wouldn't let go of. And this brings us to our second piece of math in the passage.

II. ONE DANGEROUS THING ADDED TO ONE IMPOSSIBLE THING

A) Possessions on Earth Are a Great Difficulty for Heaven

1. *Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions* (22). Look carefully at the difference between how this young man first approached Jesus and how he went away. At first, passion and humility and a good question, but the moment it was all or nothing, it was an instant deal breaker. Mark gives the reason he went away, totally turned off—**for** (because) he had great possessions—as if a chemistry experiment between two totally opposite forces had gone badly wrong. My status and my station put together with Jesus: a marriage made in heaven! But the Bible says that “friendship with the world is war with God” [Jam. 4:4]; and Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” [Mat. 6:24]. When the magnetic force of Jesus aimed himself at this young man, there was a natural repelling action away from Jesus and toward earthly treasure. One passion was incompatible with the opposite, hostile passion.

2. *And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”* (23) Nothing in verses 23-27 will be of any value for you if you accept the new liberal emerging error of divorcing the kingdom from an individual getting saved. In the disciples’ minds here and in Jesus’ mind, the two mean the same thing. And if that is true, then it is also true that “difficult” here must mean “dangerous.” If “entering the kingdom” means “being saved,” then by resistless logic, missing out on the kingdom means the opposite of being saved. And that means being in great danger—the exact same danger spoken of a chapter earlier when three times Jesus described the fires of hell [cf. 9:43-48]. But Jesus is saying that wealth or possessions presents a problem for avoiding hell.

3. *And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!”* (24) The reason that the disciples were so amazed was that in this culture those who were well off in material things were assumed to be well off in spiritual things as well. God must have been blessing them for a good reason. If it’s going to be difficult for those with wealth to be saved, how much more, they thought, for those without it. So Jesus said elsewhere, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” [Mat. 5:20]. So Jesus’ hearers during these three years had this expectation. The elite classes of Jewish society were the standard for inheriting God’s promise to his people. That language about the **inheritance** was synonymous with entering the kingdom, which is why those were the words first used by the rich young man. But they didn’t put two and two together to see that Jesus was making their wealth the danger, the obstacle, not the ticket to get in.

B) Entering the Kingdom is Impossible for Man: Not for God

1. His next words put a finer point on it: a rare example of hyperbole-by-understatement. Usually we call speech “hyperbole” because it is exaggerating or overstating something. But this is a case of hyperbolic understatement: *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* (25). Have you ever looked at a needle and its eye? A camel isn’t getting in there. Some people who don’t like where this message is going will say things like, “No, no, no—the ‘eye of the needle’ was the name of gate in the wall of Jerusalem that was very difficult to lead your camel through, but not literally impossible. So this isn’t hyperbole at all, but a very literal comparison.” Now not only is there no evidence to support the claim for such a ‘gate,’ but the rest of Jesus’ words—as long as we’re after the literal meaning of things—literally say “impossible,” which is the whole point of the comparison. Notice the disciples’ response.

2. *And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”* (26). Now they were starting to hear Jesus with unclogged ears! Their brains had gone from “amazed” to “exceedingly astonished.” And the reason is that Jesus was moving from one obstacle to another. It wasn’t just the danger of wealth that they were looking at. Peter (the fishing boat owner) and Matthew (the tax collector) probably had more money than some of the other disciples, and they met people every day who had more money than them all and others who had less; and that wasn’t making or breaking who was following Jesus and who wasn’t. So Jesus completes their own train of thought by giving them the foundational principle behind the whole thing: *Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God”* (27). The first part of that equation is that it is impossible for a man to enter the kingdom. And contrary to the exegetical circus performers who think they can stuff an actual camel into this, impossible means impossible. So possessing things on earth like it’s your real treasure is **dangerous** and entering the kingdom is **impossible**. And I’m no mathematician, but it seems to me that one very dangerous thing mixed with one absolutely impossible thing equals one pretty stinking impossible thing!

3. It turns out that my title wasn’t hyperbole any more than Jesus’ example of the camel and the needle. Do the math my fellow Americans. Every heart is stone cold dead and unable to revive itself and awaken ourselves to our real treasure; and no one had lived in more greater delusion of prestige and property and self-esteem than the modern, suburban American. Do you see what great danger an American is in? Do you not understand that no one is in greater danger than us?

And all because the sinner's heart is not after one thing and one thing only:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever
[Ps. 73:25-26].

Could you have imagined before reading this text that the love of God—the love that God has within the Trinity, the love that clearly shows up in David's heart that says, "Who do I have but you?"—the love of God stands in between you and God? I thought that the love of God is what bridges the gap and makes peace. Well it certainly does, but it does so by removing an obstacle that *we* caused by lacking this love. It is our failure to love and glorify God as we ought to that issues forth into all of the other particular sins.

APPLICATION

The One Good Thing – So who do *you* love? *What* do you love? What one thing, if it were taken away, would absolutely devastate you? What one thing, if you lost it forever, would make your life no longer worth living? That one thing is your god, or your idol. That one thing is the thing you call "good news" to others; it is the thing you fear and the thing you bow down to for all the world to see.

The One Good News – Now how does Jesus love you? What is the *one thing* that proves the love of God for sinners that don't deserve it? He says this: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" [Jn. 15:13]. You and I can't do this for each other. Your mother or father or sister or brother can't be this friend to you. No matter how many jams they may have gotten you out of or ways that they've cared for you: no matter how many things you've accomplished, there is *one thing* you need more than anything else and there is *only one* who is good enough to do it. You need a substitute to stand in your place before the God who is good. Jesus is that for you. He is God and so He has God's goodness, his righteousness; and He is Man and therefore could represent you. For anyone who will turn from their sins and trust in what He does, He takes all of your sins and gives you all of his righteousness.