

Why It's Hard to Get Into Heaven

Mark 10:23-31

Rev. Brian Bill

March 11-12, 2017

I've always been intrigued by impossibilities. Here are some...

- It's impossible to sneeze with your eyes open.
- It is absolutely impossible to eat just one potato chip.
- It's impossible for the Chicago Bears to win even with a new quarterback.
- It certainly seems impossible to eat a banana without making a horrible smacking sound. One of my sisters hates this noise so I made sure to master it. Sometimes I would chase her around the house threatening to chew in her ear. To this day Cathy won't eat them...unbelievably she blames me for her banana aversion.

I almost added another impossibility to this list on Monday when Beth and I tried to put together a new Weber grill I received for my birthday. I knew I was in trouble when the outside of the box contained the phrase, "charcoal grill" in 22 different languages! Probably because it would be impossible to print the assembly guide in this many languages, the booklet inside contained no words – only pictures!

We got stumped at several points. I scrolled through some YouTube videos and found one from a guy who said it took him almost two hours to assemble his grill! While Beth maintained her composure I almost lost my sanctification. We eventually (and by that, I mean Beth) figured it out and I can't wait to start grilling Johnsonville brats this spring.

In our passage for today Jesus describes how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. He goes on to say that it's impossible for anyone to be saved but then He quickly adds that nothing is impossible with God. Here's a summary sentence of the sermon: *God loves to turn your impossibility into His possibility.*

Our text must be understood in context. BTW, we'll begin a new series after Easter called, "Context" because a text taken out of context is a pretext for a proof text. We'll look at some of the most misquoted and misunderstood verses in the Bible so that we can apply them accurately in our relational and cultural contexts. We'll jump back into our study of Mark's gospel in June.

The context for our text today deals with a first-century celebrity who *had many things but because he lacked the one thing he missed everything!* He was known as healthy and wealthy. Actually, he did not have great possessions; great possessions *had him!*

Mark 10:22 vividly describes an individual who was more in love with himself than with God and others: ***“Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”*** The man, who had run up eagerly to Jesus, now shuffles away while an internal storm ravages his soul.

We’ll discover today that Jesus is not against us having money; but when money has us it’s a whole different issue.

As the disciples watched and listened to this interaction, they were in a dilemma because they had bought into prosperity theology. Most people then (and some now) saw possessions as a sign of God’s blessings. It blew their minds that this celebrity who was extremely wealthy was allowed to just walk away from Jesus. Maybe they thought Jesus was making a mistake. This wasn’t in the owner’s manual, was it? But Jesus wasn’t impressed with his portfolio, with his position, with his prominence or by his possessions.

We’re going to unpack three main truths from Mark 10:23-31.

- **Salvation is improbable for the wealthy (23)**
- **Salvation is impossible on our own (24-27)**
- **Salvation brings incomprehensible benefits (28-31)**

1. Salvation is improbable for the wealthy (23). Jesus debriefs with the disciples after this encounter with the sad celebrity who walked away. Look at the beginning of verse 23: ***“And Jesus looked around...”*** The idea is that his eyes swept the circle. Have you ever wondered what it must have felt like to have Jesus look at you?

Once Jesus has everyone’s attention, He makes a very bold and counter-cultural statement: ***“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”*** What is it about wealth that makes it so difficult to follow Christ?

- The pursuit of possessions can strangle spiritual life. Matthew 13:22: ***“...The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”***
- The desire to be rich can lead to destruction. 1 Timothy 6:9: ***“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”***

Pastor Alan Carr suggests some other problems people run into with their possessions. Riches can become an idol, they often bring false trust, they can bind us too tightly to earth, the pursuit of money can lead to other sins and we can be tempted to hoard what we have.

Randy Alcorn posted an interesting article on Friday called: *“Lottery Winner Says Winning ‘Has Ruined My Life.’”* This is what he writes: *“One of the great ironies of gambling is that the vast majority of people lose money, while the few who win discover money doesn’t make them happy—and often it actually ruins their lives! One study reported that, ‘six months after winning the lottery, you are likely to be no happier than if you had been paralyzed in a car crash.’”*

In 2013, Jane Park, then 17, won about \$1.2 million in the U.K.’s EuroMillions lottery. Now 21, Jane was recently considering taking legal action for what she calls negligence, claiming that a person her age shouldn’t have been allowed to win. (She has since dropped her plans for a lawsuit.)

Listen to what she said: *“At times it feels like winning the lottery has ruined my life...I thought it would make it 10 times better but it’s made it 10 times worse...I have material things but apart from that my life is empty. What is my purpose in life?”*

Yet when asked if she’s ever considered ridding herself of the money that has brought such misery, her answer was an incredulous, *“What?”*

A friend passed along a 2010 article from *Psychology Today* with this headline: *“It’s not news anymore, but it’s still a surprise: the poor are more generous than the rich.”* A recent column published in *The Atlantic* gives more specifics: *“The wealthiest Americans donate 1.3 percent of their income; the poorest, 3.2 percent.”*

Several years ago, *Time Magazine* ran a stunning story called, “*Hungry Planet: What the World Eats*,” which included a photo gallery that showed the amount of food people purchased in a given week from different countries.

- One family in North Carolina spends \$342 a week on food.
- One family in California family shells out \$159 each week.
- One family in Germany eats for \$325 a week.
- And a family in Chad spends \$1.23 every 7 days!

As poor as we think we are, we are rich compared to many others. 56% of the world’s population lives in extreme poverty. Half of that number lives on less than a \$1.00 per day. Over three billion people woke up this morning not knowing where their next meal was coming from.

I recognize that it’s always a risk to talk about money in church. But this is how I look at it – I’ve preached on sin, hell, divorce, marriage and the cost of discipleship in the last month and am still standing! I realize that we’ve given emphasis recently to the option of digital giving through the Edgewood App. Let me quickly say that our budget is doing fine and offerings are up. In fact, I’m told that 33 new people started giving in February! My concern is not the budget but whether each of us individually is honoring God with our giving because how we manage the money God has entrusted to us is directly linked to our discipleship.

Are you aware that there are more verses in the Bible regarding our resources than about Heaven and Hell combined? The Bible has fewer than 300 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith and over 2,000 verses that deal with wealth and possessions! Of the 38 parables Jesus told, 16 of them are about money. The inescapable conclusion is that how we deal with finances in general, and what we give in particular, is a big deal to God. There really is no way to separate faith and finances.

According to a study on Christian giving called, “*Passing the Plate*,” more than one out of four American Protestants give no money at all. I was surprised to learn that the median giving for an American Christian is just \$200 a year. One sermon title I came across captures the state of Christian giving: “*Cirrhosis of the Giver*.”

I’m going to make an assumption that most of us want to grow in generosity. But some of us may really struggle in this area because we find ourselves holding back instead of giving away. Let’s look at two verses from Proverbs 3:9-10 because

they'll help us grow in our generosity: ***“Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”*** We're told *what* to do, *how* to do it and finally *why* we should give to God.

Notice that the word ***“your”*** is used four times. That reminds us that this topic is deeply personal and for many of us it's also deeply private. We don't really want anyone, even God, putting their nose in our money matters. I see three ways that you and I can generate some generosity from this passage.

- **Make God weightier than your wealth.** In the first part of verse 9 we're told *what* to do: ***“Honor the Lord with your wealth.”*** To ***“honor”*** means to consider Him as weighty or heavy. Our view of God determines everything else about us. If we consider Him weighty, we will live and give accordingly. If we see God as out to get us, then we'll be afraid and give only to appease His anger. And, if we don't think much of God at all, chances are we won't give much either. It's interesting that we're told to ***“honor”*** the Lord.
- **Give God your first and your best.** The second half of verse 9 tells us *how* to do that: ***“...and with the firstfruits of all your produce.”*** God is not interested in our lame leftovers. Instead, He wants our first and our best. In the Old Testament God's people were to give:
 - ✓ **The firstborn of their flocks** (Exodus 13:1-2)
 - ✓ **The firstfruits of their fields** (Leviticus 23:9-14)

When we give first we show that we are placing Him ahead of everything else and when we give our best it's an act of respect and a declaration of trust that He will take care of us.

- **When you give you'll really live.** Proverbs 3:10 answers the *why* question: ***“Then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”*** When we follow God's precepts we will then experience God's promises. When we give, we'll have more than we need so we can give even more.

Randy Alcorn has written one of the best (and shortest) books on how to generate generosity called *The Treasure Principle*. Here are two of his main points:

- **God owns everything and I am his money manager.** Psalm 24:1 – ***“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”*** When I honor God with my wealth I am declaring that He owns me, and everything that I have.
- **My heart always goes where I put God’s money.** We tend to think that our money follows our heart but Jesus said it’s the other way around in Matthew 6:21 – ***“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*** Money leads; hearts follow. By giving to God first and by giving him my best, I make sure my heart is focused on heavenly things. Every time you drop something in the plate or give digitally you should whisper something like this: *“See you in heaven.”* We show what we love by what we do with what we have. S. Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-A, would often say, *“It’s OK to have wealth. But keep it in your hands, not in your heart.”*

One pastor nailed it when he wrote these words: *“It is an anomaly of modern life that many find giving to be a burden. Such persons have omitted a preliminary giving. If one first gives himself to the Lord, all other giving is easy.”*

God loves to turn your impossibility into His possibility.

The first thing we’ve learned is that *salvation is improbable for the wealthy.* Secondly, we’ll see that *salvation is impossible on our own.*

2. Salvation is impossible on our own (24-27). After describing how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples have an emotional reaction in verse 24: ***“And the disciples were amazed at his words...”*** The idea is that they were greatly surprised because this messed with their theology. Let’s keep reading: ***“But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!’”*** I love how Jesus called them children! In John 13:3 Jesus says, ***“Little children, yet a little while I am with you...”***

Jesus wants them to know that while the gospel is easy to understand, it’s hard to get into heaven. I’m reminded of Matthew 7:13-14: ***“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”***

And then Jesus uses an unforgettable illustration to make His point that salvation is impossible on our own. Listen to verse 25: ***“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.”***

There’s a common interpretation of this passage that is pretty cool. Jerusalem had several gates in its walls that were called by different names – the East Gate and the West Gate and one with an unfortunate name – the Dung Gate! Apparently there was another very small and short gate called, “The Eye of the Needle.” If a merchant wanted to get through this gate, he would have to unload the burdens the camel was bearing and force the animal to get on his knees to crawl through.

This is a great illustration about the importance of unloading what is weighing us down and coming to Christ in our knees, but the only problem is that it’s probably not true. If there was a gate like this, why didn’t the camel driver just use one of the bigger gates to get in? On top of that, there’s no evidence that this gate actually existed at the time of Jesus! The earliest record of this legend comes from the 9th Century.

This interpretation makes us miss the main point that Jesus is making about the impossibility of entering the kingdom of heaven. Actually Jesus wants us to think of a literal camel, the largest animal in Israel at that time and a sewing needle, likely made out of bone or wood with a very small opening at the top for thread. The picture is absurd, right? There’s no way a huge camel could fit through the eye of a needle! And that’s his point. *God loves to turn your impossibility into His possibility.* [Demonstrate with a toy dinosaur going through a needle]

BTW, camels were traditionally the most “sulky” and “sad” looking of all beasts, which may have made the disciples think of the rich man who sulked away with great sadness instead of surrendering to the Savior.

Jesus is using hyperbole, which is an exaggerated statement to make us think about something absurd, even funny. When I think of camels I laugh because my mind goes to our trip to Israel when Beth almost fell off a camel when it suddenly laid down when we were riding it!

The disciples are dumbfounded by this description as seen in verse 26: ***“And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’”*** To be ***“exceedingly astonished”*** means to be *“abundantly struck out of their senses.”* This blew their minds! The disciples realize that redemption is impossible on their

own. This reminds me of their question in Luke 13:23-24: ***“Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, ‘Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.’”***

In Mark 10:27, we see that ***“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.’”*** Once again Jesus fixes his eyes on his disciples and teaches them an incredible truth about salvation. Left to ourselves we are lost and if we try to get into heaven on our own we will never make it. The only way to get there is to admit that we are impossibly separated from Him because of our sins. When we throw ourselves on His mercy we can be saved because with Him *all things are possible!*

God loves to turn your impossibility into His possibility.

- Are you faced with something right now that seems impossible? Remember what Abraham was asked in Genesis 18:14: ***“Is anything too hard for the LORD?”***
- Do you have friction with a friend or is your marriage a mess? Jeremiah 32:27: ***“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?”***
- Do you have a rough situation going on at school or at work? Romans 8:31: ***“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”***
- Have you, or a loved one, received some bad health news recently? In Mark 9:23 Jesus tells the father of the young man who was demon possessed: ***“All things are possible for one who believes.”***
- Are your finances unraveling? Jeremiah 32:17: ***“Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.”***
- Do you feel like it is impossible to be saved because of the sins you have done? Or do you feel like you don’t need to be saved because you’re basically a “good person”? Nate Larkin writes: *“What keeps most of us from God is not the sin we know we have, but the righteousness we think we have.”* Jesus looks at you and at me and says, ***“With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”***

It’s interesting that when Mary was told that she was going to conceive even while she was a virgin, the angel said, ***“Nothing will be impossible with God.”*** The

virgin birth is possible only with God. And now we read that the *new birth* is possible only with God!

God loves to turn your impossibility into His possibility.

First, *salvation is improbable for the wealthy.*

Second, *salvation is impossible on our own.*

3. Salvation brings incomprehensible benefits (28-31). After listening to Jesus, once again Peter can't keep quiet as seen in verse 28: ***“Peter began to say to him, ‘See we have left everything and followed you.’”*** He wants Jesus to know how much they've sacrificed for Him and what they'll have to show for it. The phrase, ***“See we...”*** is emphatic. Peter, Andrew, James and John left their fishing franchise to follow Christ. Matthew bolted from this tax booth. Simon the Zealot gave up his revolutionary ways. Everyone left something. In Matthew 19:27, Peter adds, ***“What then will we have?”***

It's easy to pile on Peter but someone in our Growth Group on Wednesday reminded me how much she appreciates Peter because he always said what everyone else was thinking. Jesus then describes three benefits of believing in Him.

- **New relationships.** While it's true that the disciples have left a lot to follow the Lord, it's as if Jesus doesn't let Peter finish. We see that with how verse 28 begins: ***“Peter began to say...”*** One gets the impression that Peter was just getting started when we read in verse 29: ***“Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you...’*** The word ***“truly”*** is translated as *‘amen’* or *‘verily.’* Jesus is making an emphatic point when He says, ***“I say to you...”***

Now that He has Peter's full attention He continues: ***“...there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and the gospel...”*** There is an incomprehensible benefit for everyone who has left possessions or family or land for the Lord and the mission of the gospel. Jesus records and rewards every sacrifice.

Verse 30 describes the new relationships that believers have: ***“who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands.”*** Notice that believers receive this

right ***“now in this time.”*** Where do we find that many family members? God has given us new relationships in the global and local church.

I often think of the new relationships that missionaries make when they leave this land and go to another. When we ministered in Mexico City for three years our girls addressed our team members as Uncle Jack and Aunt Esther, Uncle Jay and Aunt Carolyn. I think of Kylie White’s willingness to go to Canada this summer to learn more about Bible translation or Emily Mills who is going back to Thailand this May or our students who are going to Belize in July. Each one will make new relationships with believers in other lands – brothers, sisters, moms, dads, aunts and uncles.

Some of you have been disowned because of your faith in Jesus. Friends have pulled back because you are now born again. It can feel lonely. Listen. We are your new faith family – we are your father and mother and brother and sister.

- **New rejection.** Blessings come and battles also come as seen in the next phrase of verse 30: ***“...with persecutions.”*** Properly understood, persecution is also a blessing as Jesus said in Matthew 5:10-12: ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”***

Among other things, this is where the prosperity gospel breaks down because we can’t skip the promise of persecution. Serving the Savior always involves suffering because the cross comes before the crown. Acts 14:22: ***“through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”*** Philippians 1:29: ***“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”*** And 2 Timothy 3:12 is so clear: ***“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*** We’re so far from this sometimes aren’t we? I saw a post on Facebook recently that captures a common sentiment: ***“You’re ruining my day, Starbucks!!!! Out of chai!”***

- **New rewards.** We receive new relationships and rejection in the here and now and there are also rewards that are not here yet: ***“...and in the age to***

*come eternal life.” This is a promise you can count on. Verse 31 gives us assurance that things will all be straightened out in heaven: “**But many who are first will be last, and the last first.**” Christianity is an upside-down kingdom – *The humble are exalted, mourners are comforted and losers are keepers!**

God loves to turn your impossibility into His possibility!

In His assembly guide...

- **Salvation is improbable for the wealthy (23)**
- **Salvation is impossible on our own (24-27)**
- **Salvation brings incomprehensible benefits (28-31)**

We’re going to end our service differently. I’m going to ask that all the lights be turned down because I want us to listen to a brief interview between someone from Voice of the Martyrs and a pastor from China. The audio isn’t the best because he couldn’t bring a bunch of equipment with him. Here’s what the interviewer said: *“We’re trading sound quality for the opportunity to hear first hand from this brother who’s putting his life on the line.”*

Check out how this pastor embraces persecution. If you want to listen to the whole interview you can access it through the Sermon Extras link on the Edgewood App. For more information on Voice of the Martyrs, go to persecution.com.

When the interview ends, we’re going to simply sit in silence and darkness as we ask the Holy Spirit to apply His message to us.

Silence

Lord’s Prayer

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

Child Dedication (10:45)