

December 21, 2021

OUR INABILITY AND THE FALLACY OF SACRIFICE

Mark 10:17-31

*(2 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)*

In the 1999 film, *The Matrix*, the main character, Neo, is offered one of two pills to take. He's been living in a simulated world, yet aware of it throughout his life. Therefore, the two pills represent a choice for him. If he takes the blue pill, he'll go right back to being deluded and unaware of the deception around him. However, if he takes the red pill, he's going to face the harsh reality that he's been living in a vat, kept alive by machines, and that the world around him is a fantasy. He chooses the red pill, and after that moment, he's never able to see the world the same way.

There are many ideas you and I hold to that need the correction of the Scripture. They may not even be things we've been explicitly taught. It may be things that we've merely intuited by nature of living in this world. And yet periodically the Scripture shows us something that tells us, you need to alter the paradigm through which you're looking at this.

We already saw that in the text we looked at last time in Mark's gospel. You'll remember that the disciples had assumed that Jesus didn't want to waste time interacting with children because (in the minds of the disciples) children were worthless. Children's helplessness and neediness were seen as repulsive realities that (thankfully) they'd one day outgrow. And yet Jesus gave them a contrasting paradigm, telling them that children are a gift from our God in that they provide a picture for us of what is necessary to approach our Lord if we're going to be saved. If we're going to enter the kingdom of God, we must approach our Lord from an understanding that we are indeed helpless and needy—just like children.

Well, we're right on the heels of that interaction when an incident occurs that allows Jesus to illustrate this truth and provide even more paradigm-shifting truths for his disciples. Mark tells us that a man approaches Jesus, showing him honor by kneeling before him, and asking him a question. Specifically, the man asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 17). But Jesus' first move is not to address the man's question but the title the man uses, as he calls Jesus "Good teacher." Jesus responds, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (v. 18).

Now, there are a couple of ways that we could interpret this wrongly. We could imagine that Jesus is pushing back on the reality that he is good, and we could think that Jesus is suggesting that he's less than God. But neither is the case. He is both good and God. He is good because he is God. He is God the Son. Then why begin by seemingly challenging the title the man uses to address him? My guess is that there are one of two reasons (or perhaps both). First, if he's going to call Jesus good, when only God is good, then the man needs to consider the ramifications of that. After all, in a minute, Jesus is going to issue this man a command, and if Jesus is indeed the good God who rules over all things, then for the man to disobey—for whatever reason—is utterly

irrational. And so Jesus may challenge the man's address just to say, "Are you ready to deal with the ramifications of recognizing who I am?" Second, Jesus may be laying the groundwork to challenge this man's understanding that he (the man) is good. In other words, we're about to see that this man believes he's quite good. He abides by God's law, but Jesus is already noting that it is wrong for any man to think that way. And, indeed, Jesus is about to expose the man's lack of goodness.

Anyway, after pressing this issue of goodness, Jesus gets to answering the question. He says to him, "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'" (vv. 19). Jesus is obviously quoting from the ten commandments, substituting "Do not defraud" for "Do not covet," probably because it's equally wrong to defraud and a wealthy man wouldn't be as prone to covetousness as to defraud others in order to gain wealth. In other words, Jesus tells the man that if he wants to inherit eternal life, he must obey all of God's law.

Now, why would Jesus say that? I mean, the law was never given in order that one could gain eternal life through the law, right? Doesn't Paul repeatedly argue that no one is justified by works of the law in Galatians? Indeed, he does. And, no, no one is granted eternal life because of their obedience to the law. But the reason for that is not because the law is somehow deficient in promising life to the one who obeys it perfectly. The reason that is the case is because, as sinners, none of us can obey the law perfectly. And so, if anyone tries to gain life through obeying God's law, then he'll only find himself under a curse because no one is able to keep God's law perfectly.

But that's just the thing, this man thinks he's good. Therefore, instead of answering, "I can't do that," he responds, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth" (v. 20). This doesn't mean that the man is a hypocritical liar who wants to present himself better than he is, like a thief claiming he's never stolen anything. Rather, this is a man, mostly likely, who thinks of only the externals of the law. That is, he may claim that he's never committed adultery, for example, but he's not considering that to lust in his heart is already to violate that command. He may not have murdered, but he's missing the reality that being unjustly angry with his brother is already a violation of that command. And Jesus is about to expose something else the man doesn't see—the fact that he treasures something more than the Lord. And he does it by issuing him a command that the man simply refuses to follow.

Mark tells us, "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (v. 21).

Now, what is Jesus doing here? Is he saying that someone can't be a Christian apart from giving away every possession? No. If so, we'd all be condemned. What Jesus is doing here—and with all he's said leading up to this—is he's slowly and methodically directing this man to see his own inability. He's revealing this man's sin. He's showing that he's not as good as he thinks he is. He's going to show that this man loves his material wealth and the security it provides him more than

he loves God and depending on him. He's showing this man's need for God to save him. And this leads us to our first note.

### **Revealing our need is a gracious act of God**

The section of Mark that details Jesus' encounter with this man ends, "Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (v. 22). So, should our response be, "Way to go, Jesus. You got him. He was so confident, and you nailed him"? Of course not. Notice in verse 21 *why* Jesus gave him this command to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him. Mark tells us that Jesus, looking at him *loved him*. It was Jesus' love for this man that drove Jesus to issue this one command that he knew would reveal this man's sinful state and need for the Lord. And the reason love drove Jesus to expose this man's sin is because revealing our need is nothing less than an act of grace.

You see, one of the worst things that can happen with any of us is that we become blind to our need for the Lord and his forgiving, cleansing, transforming grace that stems from his gospel work of living, dying, and rising for us. The reason is because it's only when we see our need that we have any chance of turning to Christ. Otherwise, we remain blinded, thinking that we are fine. As one person has said, "Jangling keys only sound appealing to a man who recognizes he's in prison." The good news is only heard as good news if you recognize the bad news that we're sinners under the right and just judgment of a holy God. Jesus methodically, carefully, and wisely said everything he said because he was graciously exposing this man's need. This rich young ruler may have walked away sorrowful, but he didn't walk away blinded to his idolatry—that he loved his material wealth and the security it gave him more than God. Jesus had helped him see it.

This is why I say this is a paradigm-shifting truth. Jesus did a gracious thing for this man, and he walked away sorrowful. But you and I get it, don't we? How many times has a brother or sister pointed out something to us that exposes our weakness or sin, and instead of being grateful at the chance to repent and grow, we find ourselves sorrowful that our need or sin was exposed? Revealing our need is an act of God's grace. That's why the Lord graciously gave his law to his people in the first place. It wasn't so that they might obey it perfectly and be saved. It was so that they might see they couldn't obey it perfectly and look to Jesus and be saved. As we're remembering the birth of Christ, let's celebrate that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4-5). God revealed our need so that we might cry out to him, be forgiven, and be adopted as sons.

But this story doesn't end as the young man walks away. Mark tells us that after the man's departure, Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (v. 23). And, of course, Mark tells us that the disciples were amazed.

Now, perhaps, maybe seeing how shocked they are, you might think that Jesus would dial it back a bit, saying, “Well, I don’t mean everybody who has wealth, and I don’t mean it’s really, really hard.” But he doesn’t. In fact, he doubles down, saying, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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” (vv. 24-25).

Now, for some reason, people have come up with all kinds of ways to lessen Jesus’ illustration here about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom, that is, to be saved. You may have heard people argue that there was an opening in a wall called the “eye of the needle,” and a camel would have to get down on his knees to get through. In other words, Jesus would be saying, “It’s hard, but you can get there with a little effort.” But there’s no such hole in a wall called the eye of the needle. That’s just made up.

Here’s what Jesus is talking about when he references a camel and the eye of a needle. He’s referring to an actual camel and an actual eye of a needle. In other words, Jesus takes the largest animal known in that area (the camel) and the smallest opening they could imagine (the eye of a needle), and he’s saying, “It’s as hard for a rich man to be saved as it is for that large animal to get through that small opening.” That is to say, it’s impossible. In fact, we know that’s what Jesus is saying because he begins verse 27 saying, “With man it is impossible.”

Now, the disciples are taken back by this. Mark writes, “And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’” (v. 26). You see, in their minds, wealth was a clear blessing from God so that if you saw someone with great material wealth, you would say, “The Lord’s favor is clearly on that person.” Therefore, if Jesus is saying it’s impossible for that person to be saved, then how can anyone be saved?

So, why does Jesus say this about the rich? Well, it’s because of what he’d just taught during the whole incident when his disciples were trying to prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus. Jesus had said that if we are to inherit the kingdom (be saved), then we must become like children, by which he meant, recognizing our need, desperation, and helplessness in ourselves. In other words, if you and I are to be saved, we have to recognize we have nothing to bring to the table. We’re no greater than the man who prayed, “Be merciful to me a sinner.” We’ve got nothing else to offer or point to.

So why would riches be an obstacle to that? Well, for the obvious reason that riches mask our neediness and helplessness. Riches provide for us a façade of security that says, “I don’t necessarily need the Lord to come through for me. My riches can always provide for me what I need.” In fact, and this is what Jesus is saying, if just left to ourselves, our riches will completely and perpetually blind us to our need to seek the Lord and abandon all hopes for security except in him. That’s why Jesus says that it’s impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom. His riches blind him to his neediness and helplessness, which are essential for salvation. But then Jesus adds an additional note. He says, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (v. 27). And this brings me to my second point, that salvation is a miraculous work of God.

## **Salvation is a miraculous work of God**

Consider what Jesus is saying if indeed any wealthy person comes to faith. He's saying that God is doing the impossible; he's working a miracle. Every time a rich person comes to know Jesus it's because God just did for that man what was impossible for that man to do for himself. He opened his eyes to his helplessness and neediness and showed him that Christ is what he needs.

But we'd be fooling ourselves to think that only the wealthy need such a miracle. All of us tend to think that we're sufficient. We tend to be blinded to our helplessness and neediness. And so, any time any of us are saved, it's because our Lord has worked a miracle. He took our self-sufficient-tinted lenses off and revealed our need so that we might be saved. And this might be paradigm-shifting, if indeed we have been arrogant in any way about our standing with the Lord. Brothers and sisters, it's all of grace. God has worked a miracle so that you might come to him. And perhaps this can be paradigm-shifting as we hope for others as well. You and I can come up with all kinds of reasons why it feels impossible for someone we know and loved to be saved. Perhaps we even think, "It'd take a miracle." Well, Jesus agrees. But what is impossible with man is possible with God. So pray and witness in hope.

But the story doesn't end with this teaching either. Peter wants to talk more about this idea of placing one's complete hope in Jesus, depending wholly on him, and he wants to acknowledge that he and the others have done just that. In other words, Peter is saying to Jesus that they've done the very thing this young man wouldn't do. He says, "See, we have left everything and followed you" (v. 28).

Now, you might think that Jesus would respond, "No you haven't." After all, Peter still had a home, it seems. But Jesus isn't interested in disputing this point. In fact, Jesus has already referred to the disciples as "children." Did you see that in verse 24? He'd addressed them as "children" when he was telling them how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, which is the one and only time he refers to them this way in Mark's gospel. And he does it right after saying one must become like a child to be saved. I think he does that to say, "Yes, you've rightly seen your neediness like a child and come to me." That's why I think he doesn't tell Peter he's wrong. But he does seek to change Peter's paradigm if he believes he's really sacrificed to follow Jesus. He shows him that sacrifice is impossible because of the blessings of God.

## **Sacrifice is impossible because of the blessings of God**

Jesus' acknowledges they've left much to follow him, but he tells them that they'll receive so much more. Jesus answers, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (vv. 29-31).

What is Jesus saying here? Can this be true? It doesn't feel literally true that a believer who walks away from, say, an acre of land to follow Jesus inevitably gets 100 acres of land. We can surely find examples of that. I'd go so far as to say it's rarely if ever happened. So, what is Jesus saying?

I think he's saying that whatever we give up to follow Jesus, we receive a hundredfold of *in and through his church*. In other words, you may leave your father and mother to follow Jesus, but in the body of Christ you'll have a hundred fathers and mothers. I know that's been true in my life. I've walked with brothers and sisters in Christ who have walked closer to me than my own siblings.

Even with lands, in the church not only have many of you shown me hospitality, but you've provided for me in times of need and cared for me. I feel like right now, if I were going through something painful, I could reach out and have hundreds of people praying and caring for me because they love me. And so could you. That's the hundredfold Jesus is talking about.

And that's just the "in this age" part of the blessing. Ultimately, those who bow the knee to Christ also receive eternal life. And nothing in this life compares to that. Even suffering can't hold a candle to the glory to be revealed to us (Rom 8:18).

Now, to be sure, we're also promised persecutions. This isn't a health and wealth gospel. We will suffer. Some will die for the sake of Jesus at the hands of Jesus' enemies. But all are blessed with his people and with eternal life. And who wouldn't take that trade one hundred percent of the time?

Ultimately what this means is that sacrificing for the sake of our Lord is impossible. We may feel like we've sacrificed much for Jesus' sake, but that's just because we're not seeing clearly. We need a paradigm adjustment. What's real is that we've been given more in this life and in the life to come than we could ever imagine. How can you rightly use the word "sacrifice" when we receive much, much more than we could ever give up.

Just as Neo took a pill in the movie, *The Matrix*, that helped him look past the façade much of this world held out to him and shifted the paradigm through which he viewed reality, I hope this text has done the same for us this morning. There are certain things that we think are bad, like having our weaknesses, sins, and needs revealed. But that's a gracious act of God. We may see our own decision to follow Christ as something about which we can boast, but Jesus tells us that it's just the evidence that God did the impossible with us. And we may feel like we've sacrificed much, but we've received so much more, the word "sacrifice" feels embarrassing to say. So this morning, let's allow God to change the paradigm through which we see the world and see from the perspective of Jesus' teaching here, which should lead us to have grateful hearts toward the one who opened our eyes to see our need, opened our hearts to trust him, and blesses us so much that sacrificing for his sake is impossible. And let's give thanks to him for these things now as we come to the table. Amen.