

Luke 18:18-30—God Did the Impossible with You

What must I do to inherit eternal life? He's a young man who has had a successful life—he's rich. We don't know much else about him other than he was ruler—probably some type of leader in the community. It doesn't seem like he's trying to trap or test Jesus but honestly wants to know: **“Good teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?”**

Jesus responds: **“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”** Jesus could have set him straight like we might have wanted to say, but he doesn't. Jesus wants to lead the man to the answer for himself. This response should have tipped the guy off as Jesus continues: **“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’” (v.20).**

I wonder, is the man a little frustrated with Jesus' response? He already knew all of that. In fact, he already had done all of that. **“All these I have kept since I was a boy,”** he said. In other words, he has carefully guarded these commands like the security detail guards the president. He's been doing it since he was old enough to learn those commandments too! And you know what, it's very possible that this young ruler really was just an all-around good guy. He was faithful to his spouse and did not let his eyes wander. He had not killed anyone and maybe even took good care to protect and love his neighbor. He had not stolen anything and spoke the truth. He loved mom and dad and gave them the honor and respect due them. But it's quite clear this wasn't enough for him; otherwise, he wouldn't have come to Jesus with this question. There must be something he's missing! What else am I supposed to do, Good Teacher, to have eternal life?

Cynical me would have probably blurted out, “But have you though, kept all those commandments?” Jesus doesn't. Jesus looked at the man and in Mark we are told: “He loved him.” And because Jesus loved this man, he doesn't tell him, “It's okay. I understand. Just try better next time.” Instead, Jesus tells him what he needs to hear, **“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” (v.22).** You can almost see his face drop. How could the good teacher suggest such a thing? He was looking for something astounding to do, some special instructions, but this? This is impossible. The young man goes away sad and we hear nothing about him again. This poor soul thought that he had kept the commandments. But looking into that clear mirror of the Law he sees the ugly truth. He failed to keep the very first one: you shall have no other gods but fear, love, and trust in the one true God above all things.

What must I do to have eternal life? So easily like that young ruler we find ourselves thinking we need, or should, or have to do something to have or keep God's love and life. If our pride gets the best of us, we look at our lives and might think: I'm not that bad. We all know we aren't perfect; we aren't naïve enough to say we are. At the same time, you do your best. That should count for something, shouldn't it? You've kept most of God's commands careful to not to fall into those egregious sins that we can't believe someone would do. You know where the line is that you aren't supposed to cross. Sure, you tiptoe that line, but you know when not to go too far. And when you have failed and fallen, you have the reasons why you did it that should make it, if not okay, at least acceptable. They should tell you, "I understand..." Or "Don't worry about it...everyone struggles at times. You've tried your best; no one is perfect. At least you have or haven't..." so that it's swept under the rug and ignored. But while that might make us feel better for a little while, your sin still hangs over your head. So, what are we supposed to do?

Jesus looks at you today and he loves you. He doesn't tell you, "It's okay. I understand. Everyone struggles." Instead, he holds the mirror of the Law in front of your face to see what it is you hold nearest and dearest in life. What's the thing that you can't see how you could live without? Is it your stuff, your things you've accumulated, the land you own, your retirement and bank accounts? Would you give it up to follow Jesus? What about your rights and freedoms? Could you give those up? Is it your reputation and good standing with others? Your health, your life dreams, goals, or career? Would you be able and willing to give it up if Jesus told you in order to follow him? Is it your family, your mom, dad, or friends? What if those relationships have to be left behind? Is it your spouse? Would you still praise God and follow him if he or she is taken from you? What about your child? Could you let your dear daughter or precious son go? Your grandchildren?

It's not wrong to love those things. God gives them to us to bless us! But then we love them too much, hold on to them too tightly, and depend on them to bring us peace in life and the satisfaction we crave. So often we don't even realize how we set them up as things that we fear, love, and trust making them into false gods. But they are false because they will always fail and disappoint.

When the ruler goes away sad the people are shocked. This guy was the epitome of what you wanted to be. He was successful and respected. He was the type of guy moms wanted their daughters to marry and dads hoped their sons would turn out to be. From whom he was and what he did, surely he had special favor with God. But Jesus explains, **"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"** (v.24-25).

And the people can't believe it, "**Who then can be saved?**" This is impossible Jesus! And for us, yes, it is! All of us have stuff and things we treasure and often to an abundance. The more we have, the more difficult it is to follow Jesus! But even if you were to give up family and friends, house and land, abandon your dreams and leave it all behind, you would still lack one thing. That's what you need to do to be saved: be good. Not good in the eyes of society or your peers but good, holy, without sin just like God. But there is only one who is good and that is God alone. We love the wrong things too much and depend on the wrong things so easily which are evidence of hearts that are by nature not good. God doesn't ever say, "No worries, I understand, it's fine," when we have screwed up again. His Law always says, "Do better." And then it shows you how it's never done. So, then who can be saved?

Jesus doesn't deny it. On your own it is impossible for you do to something to be saved. But "**What is impossible with men is possible with God.**" This is how our God operates. Look at the beginning with Creation from nothing in six 24-hour periods. Impossible. Look at the plagues in Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, the sun standing still. Impossible. When the angel announces Jesus' birth to his virgin mother, she wonders how this can be. And the angel Gabriel assures her, "Nothing is impossible with God." That God from eternity became man and makes his dwelling with us so many have screamed and fought that that is not possible. But you see him live a life without once falling or failing in sin in thought, word, or action. We can't believe that would be possible with all the temptations in this world. But what is impossible for sinful man is possible with the God-man Jesus Christ. He is good. He is the one. Then we see him claim our excuse-making lips and idol-creating hearts that fear, love, and trust too much the created instead of the Creator. There he is taking your place for things he didn't do. There we see him enduring God turning his face from him. It's impossible that he should love us like that. But what is impossible for loveless, selfish human beings, is possible with God-man Christ who is love and showed us what love is that while we were still sinners, he died for us. Here is one thing we know for sure. Death is the end. It's final. There's nothing more you can do. But God does the impossible raising Christ to life; the good do not die but have eternal life.

Who then can be saved? The ones God chooses from eternity. The ones he calls out of darkness. The ones he makes good. It should be impossible. But what is impossible with men is possible with God. Your sins are forgiven. They aren't ignored, they are paid in full. You aren't a project or work in-progress. It is finished. Your sins are forgiven. You are good. That's what God calls you in baptism when he gives you a clean conscience before him. Reason says it's

impossible that water could do such things. And, yes, if it was just water that is true. But water used with God's Word saves you. The impossible is made possible as you are clothed in Christ's perfect life and innocent death and you rose with him washed of sin in his blood. It sounds so impossible as you continue to wrestle with sin in life. It feels so impossible as temptation haunts you and Satan's accusations plague you. That's why private confession and absolution is so important. You get to hear it privately from your pastor that that sin that weighs heavily and troubles you deeply is forgiven. I'm here to do that for you. And then Jesus does the should-be impossible: he invites to take and eat, take and drink his body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. Your body is united with his body and blood given and poured out for you. This forgiveness is for you. Depart in peace—eternal life is yours. Come back again soon. Reason says this is all impossible. But we know, believe and trust this is most certainly true. Even the ability to do that is impossible for us to come to on our own. So God works this saving faith in your heart and through Word and Sacrament to keep you in that faith until life everlasting.

So, who then can be saved? All who believe shall have eternal life. In Christ you are not lacking anything but he graciously gives us every good thing. The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want. Or even better, I shall not be lacking. So should he call us to give up or let go to follow him, you have nothing to worry. He always provides many times as much in this age. Before you scoff at that idea and feel the worry birds trying to take flight, remember and see how much of the impossible he already has done for you. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your understanding. He's got you in this life and will work all things to bring you to the next. It all sounds so impossible. But God makes the impossible, possible. He did it with you. Amen.