

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Doing The Impossible

Mark 10:17-31

18th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

17As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and your mother.'" 20He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!" 24And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25It 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." 26They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 27Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things

are possible.”

28Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and the sake of the good news, 30who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age-houses, brothers, sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions-and in the age to come eternal life. 31But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

(Note: The story is meant as an example of Jesus’ little dictum for gospel praxis, “the first will be last and the last will be first.” The Kingdom of God is presented as effecting a great reversal of fortunes, bestowing “eternal life” to the inevitably terminal people who enter it. But that reversal strikes at the core of the typical “well-to-doers” assumptions about “fortune.” Those who are truly “fortunate” are those who receive eternal life-a life that is acceptable to and endures before God.)

DIAGNOSIS: Hanging on to “First Things” (the Rewards of the Law) for Dear Life

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *An Honest Seeker with Faulty Assumptions*

The man who comes to Jesus is not unlike many of the “good people” who today inquire about their acceptability before God. The issue of “eternal life” is not so much about longevity of life as it is about the kind of life God deems worthy of keeping around. Accordingly, this man presents himself not only as one who is conscientious in the way he lives towards others (keeping all the second table of the commandments from his youth) but as one whose life exhibits signs that law-keeping pays off. He is

not only very rich but likable, a “well-to-do” person indeed. In addition, he is also a genuinely religious man: evidenced, initially, at least, by his bending the knee to Jesus and acknowledging him as a “good teacher,” that is, as the One who, to all appearances, seems to represent God honestly. This man is an honest seeker who wrestles with the big question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” But his very framing of the question belies a grave error: He harbors the legalistic assumption (based on his rewarded keeping of the second table of the law) that “eternal life” (acceptability before God) is fundamentally a matter of *his* “doing,” that is, law keeping.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Shocked at Jesus
(Following the Law and Its Rewards)

Of course, it is only in the encounter with Jesus that the legalistic error is exposed. In order to have “eternal life”—a life that endures before God—Jesus teaches that you need only one thing: namely, *him* to follow. With regard to eternal life, forget about the law and its rewards: “Sell all you have and give it to the poor,” Jesus says. “Possessions are of no avail; don’t trust in them; trust in (follow) me and that inheritance will follow.” But even here we need to beware. One could easily misunderstand the statement about “selling everything” as meaning that Jesus was simply tinkering with the idea of what it is that we are to *do*, as Peter thought (v. 28). Jesus is not suggesting that. Rather, he is asserting that what you need for eternal life has nothing to do with the law and its reward, but everything to do with following/trusting him. Just how far short the man is from “eternal life”—from enduring before God—is seen in his shock at Jesus’ audacious claim (v. 22). This, by the way, was also true for the disciples (people like us?) who were equally perplexed (vs. 24) and astounded (vs. 26) by this word. “Who can be saved,” if not this kind of man? Neither the man nor the disciples could entertain the possibility that following

Jesus (as opposed to doing the deeds of the law with all its proven rewards) could be the single key for entering the Kingdom. In the encounter with Jesus and his word, this man exposed that he was bent (like the disciples), not on following Jesus, not on faith in Jesus, but on following the law and its rewards.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Salvation Impossible* *(“He went away grieving”)*

The encounter ended with the man going “away grieving, for he had many possessions” (v. 22) “Grieving” is a key word here, for it signals that the encounter with Jesus revealed that those possessions-those rewards for commandment keeping-were not a sign of eternal life at all. Rather, his “grieving” (and his walking away from Jesus rather than following Jesus) reveals that he is “mortal”-that death, not life, is at work in him. [Note: Death is not simply the lack of longevity, but the impending sign of his ultimate/final/eternal unacceptability to God.] His *doing*, regardless of how impressive it was to the disciples (then as now), does not and cannot inherit eternal life. It is simply impossible. Therefore, Jesus simply exposed the scam in this man’s life-that keeping the law (while achieving good and necessary rewards for the neighbor and enriching his present existence in many ways) is not key to the kingdom and eternal life. At best, his riches are serving as a fig leaf against his ultimate, eternal unacceptability before God. They offer no lasting security. To us, they may look like signs of the good life (the acceptable life) but, ultimately, to God they are not. It is simply impossible for any human being, no matter how good they look to us, to enter the kingdom on their own.

PROGNOSIS: Surrendering to the “Last Things,”

Following Jesus for Eternal Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Jesus and the Impossible*

What shocked legalists and perplexed would-be disciples need to know is that Jesus “loves” them, even when they cannot love him *first*. What successful legalists and would-be disciples need to hear is that even though they walk away from Jesus *first*, Jesus does not walk away from them. To the contrary, he goes straight to Jerusalem to bear the cross for them to the very *last*. In a word, Jesus does the impossible. He goes through the eye of the needle. He passes through the reality of sin, death and unacceptability before God, and comes through on the other side with great rewards, resurrection and eternal life. “How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God,” Jesus remarks. Only God can do it. But now, with the coming of Jesus, the “good teacher” (who is “good” because he is no mere human but also God), a human being has done it, too.

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) – *Following Jesus = Receiving the Inheritance*

But just because Jesus-the God-human-has himself done the impossible is not yet good enough for Jesus. Even more, he wants legalists (like you and me) to do the impossible too. That’s why Jesus says, “Follow me.” He says, “follow me,” not because he wants to extort something from us-our money or whatever else it might be. (We’ve all heard bad stewardship messages that come off that way.) Rather, he says follow me – trust in me – because he has something to give us-namely, all that he has accomplished in his death and resurrection. And that is something is “entry into the kingdom,” the assurance of eternal life. Being a good disciple is about following, because its about receiving what Jesus already has accomplished for us. In a word, it’s about faith.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Faithful Discipleship = Sharing the Inheritance

For those who follow Jesus and have the inheritance, life is different. We are no longer seekers but sharers; we no longer “do to get” (legalism), but we “get to do” (we live for the sake of the Gospel). And that new doing is this: giving as Christ has given to us. Peter was right in a sense. Christians do “leave everything” to follow Jesus. When we follow, everything goes through the eye of the needle, the cross. Nothing remains as it was. But Peter was absolutely wrong in thinking that, as a result, we get nothing “in this age” (v. 30). To the contrary, Christians get so much that they cannot possibly out-give what they have received from Jesus. (That’s what is impossible for them to do now.) No loss “in this age” can overtake the gain of eternal life. That’s because the word “eternal” in “eternal life” begins with following/believing. Eternal life begins now already in this age and continues into the age to come. What’s important to note, however, is that discipleship in this age also entails persecution. It entails a crossing: going through the eye of needle. But that cross, when borne in faith, is simply evidence of the impossible happening in the daily life of disciples. It is already part of the down payment of inheritance being made good in this age. (In closing, a little tidbit on “the eye of the needle”: As I recall from my journey to Jerusalem some years ago, there is a city gate there called “the eye of the needle.” It was small in order to inhibit invaders from raiding the city. But that safety feature had its drawbacks. Merchants couldn’t get their camels through the gate when the beasts were loaded down with goods and possessions. In order to get through the gate, merchants would have to unload/divest their camels of their loot in order to get them through the gate. Once through, the camels were reloaded to carry the merchandise to its destination. This is the image of the cross. Disciples come with much baggage: sins and riches. In

order to enter the Kingdom we must pass through the gate-that is, the cross-but that is possible only by divesting ourselves of everything. On the other side of the entry we are again reloaded, but reloaded now for a very different future and reality. As disciples of Christ, who have entered the kingdom through him, we engage the world no longer to get life, but to give life in his name.)