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The Gospel of Luke
LX. Then Who Can Be Saved?
Luke 18:15-34

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Mark records that he was rich, Matthew says that he was young, and Luke tells us that he was a ruler – hence, the story of the rich young ruler. But the most important thing for us to know about him is that he is a really good person. He is faithful to his wife and family, has not murdered or stolen or given false witness. He honors his mother and his father. In fact, he was probably an Eagle Scout who was still helping little old ladies cross the street – the kind of guy who puts paper money, not just metal money, into the Salvation Army kettle; and who was no doubt also kind to children and animals. And the fact that he was wealthy, on top of everything else, would have been interpreted in that day as a sign that God must really like him too! And it is all of this, taken together, which explains why the disciples – in genuine amazement and concern – cry out to Jesus, *“Then who can be saved?”* after this rich young ruler walks away sorrowful and Jesus says that bit about rich persons and camels and the eye of a needle. If this wonderful, decent, good, kind, and successful person can’t get into the Kingdom of God – then, indeed, who can?

Or might it just be possible that the admission standards for the Kingdom are something very different from what we, like the disciples, have assumed? Could it even be possible that much of what we look at in our lives and in the lives of others and label as assets are, in the eyes of God, actually liabilities? This encounter between Jesus and the rich young ruler clearly upset the disciples. And perhaps that’s the whole point of this passage – that it should upset us also. That we, too, need to ask, in concern and in amazement, *“Then who can be saved?”*

The encounter between Jesus and the rich young ruler starts out so well. In addition to all the sterling qualities we have already listed, this rich young ruler gets something else right – something else big and important which many of us never get around to getting right: he knows the right question to ask. He knows the question that is the most important question of them all for a human being living under God’s heaven. He asks Jesus, *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Eternal life – not just living forever, but living right now in a way that matters most, and which most brings joy and glory to God. He is asking the right question – THE question, which ought to guide and direct every aspect of the living out of our too short days here on this earth. *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* How should I live in order to please You and to bring light and life to others?

When was the last time you and I asked that question? I mean, really asked it – as if our lives actually depended on the answer? Really asked it, also, in the sense of asking it of the right person – Jesus? Asking the right person – Jesus, the right question – what are we to do with these

lives of ours? “*Generally,*” writes one of my favorite preachers, it is rare that we look up from the thousand little details which make up our days and ponder the larger meaning and purpose of our existence. “*Generally,*” he writes, “*we human beings live according to the law of least resistance, that is, we do what the majority does. We live pretty much at random.*”¹ But the problem with living life randomly, going along with the crowd, never asking if we are intended to live for something different if not for something more – the problem with that is that life does not come with a reverse button.² Meaning, if we give our lives over to the wrong questions, never asking the right question – well, that’s a really sad way to spend our too short years on earth. And, without a reverse button, a really good way to end up at the end holding a great big bag of “if only I had known” and “what might have been” and “it’s too late now.” So this really good person, this rich young ruler, adds to his credit the fact that he is asking the one right question of the one right person: “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*”

But from there everything goes wrong. In a nutshell, though he is living a good life, is a good person, and is asking the right question of the right person – this rich young ruler is not prepared for the answer which Jesus then gives. Or he is simply not willing to believe the answer which Jesus gives. And certainly he is not willing to upend his life as it is in order to wager it all upon the life Jesus lays out for him. “*One thing you still lack,*” Jesus tells him. “*Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*” And sadness is written all across the rich young ruler’s face.

Sadness, because in that moment he realizes that there is one thing that is more important to him than even eternal life. One thing he values more than God, depends upon more than God. That there is, after all, one commandment he is perfectly content in breaking: “*Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*” “*One thing you still lack,*” says Jesus: “*Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor . . . and come, follow me.*” “*But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.*” There is one thing he cannot turn loose; one false god he is not willing to give up; one thing which means more to him than even the one true God. Money. Mammon.

“*If you want to identify me,*” writes Thomas Merton,

*If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully the thing I want to live for.*³

Money. Mammon. “*One thing you still lack,*” says Jesus. “*Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*” Says the rich young ruler in reply: “I can’t.”

What of us? First of all, do we think Jesus was just kidding here? I wouldn’t bet on it. Or do we dare to think Jesus was talking only to the rich young ruler and not also to us? I wouldn’t count on that, either. Instead, how about this: that we take Jesus at His Word here. So that we might better understand, and perhaps even more deeply feel, the amazement and the alarm of the disciples when they cry out, “*Then who can be saved?*”

Money. Mammon. Arthur Simon, in his challenging book How Much Is Enough, tells about a couple named Bryce and Ellen:

They have two sons and a daughter, and on Sundays the family attends church more often than not. Bryce manages about twenty people in a medium-sized accounting firm. He receives a good salary and is on a path that he believes may eventually move him into a circle of company executives, so he goes to work early, often stays late, and usually works some on weekends. Ellen has a part-time job with a public relations firm, which allows her to manage the kids and take care of the house. None of this is easy, but it has enabled them to buy a house in an upscale neighborhood and a lot of recreational hardware, including a raft of toys . . . and a small yacht.

Bryce and Ellen already talk about one day taking early retirement and moving to a place where they can enjoy year-round outdoor sports. Though deeply in debt, they are able to make timely payments and take pride in contributing “more than most” to church in dollar amount, which at 2.5 percent of their income is about average for church members. They would be astonished – probably offended – to have anyone suggest that they are beholden to mammon. Yet their plans and dreams, and the dreams they are nourishing in their children, are overwhelmingly directed that way.⁴

Money. Mammon. “One thing you still lack,” says Jesus. “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” And those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” Who can be saved? How can the disciples and that rich young ruler and you and me – all of us tightly clutching our idolatrous ways and means and priorities – how can any of us ever get from here to saved? And if we don’t feel the full weight and freight of that question – then, brothers and sisters, not only do we not yet understand anything at all about our real situation here in this world, but also we are not yet ready to receive the grace of that most amazing thing Jesus says next: “*What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.*”

But what exactly does He mean by that? Two things, I think. Just before His encounter with the rich young ruler, Jesus had been surrounded by parents who were bring their infant children to Him, that He might touch them and bless them. Infants. The disciples had tried to shoo them away, but Jesus had stopped them, saying, “*Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.*” But these were infants He was speaking of – what possible qualities or merits does an infant possess that opens the door to the Kingdom of God and is worthy of our emulation? Infants – the only real quality an infant possesses is that of absolute dependence upon others. A complete inability to preserve themselves in life, and therefore a total reliance upon the care of parents who love them. Helpless dependency upon a being or beings greater than itself – that’s what an infant possesses.

And that is what Jesus is inviting the rich young ruler and the disciples and you and me to see about ourselves this morning. To see first of all that the money, or whatever else it is we are clinging to more than God, in the hopeless belief that it will keep us safe and secure and happy – to see that this false god we are clinging to is just that: false! A false savior. A false promise-maker. A false premise for the living out of our days. A false assurance which will only fail us in the end – leaving us even more helpless than we were before we latched onto it. None of what we are clinging to in this world will be able to prevent suffering, to prevent sorrow, to ward off death. None of the idols we make for ourselves from out of this world will be able to see us through, keep us safe, save us in the end. They are false promises, false securities, false gods.

But false also in the sense that they can keep us from seeing the truth about our own grown-up infant helplessness. The one truth which can, indeed, set us free, lead us into salvation, preserve us not only in this life but also into the next. The truth that we are all, beneath it all and no matter what assets we think we possess, that we are all still genuinely as helpless as infants before time and tide and trouble. The truth that we cannot save ourselves, preserve ourselves, keep ourselves in life. That we come into this world helpless as infants, that we go out of this world as helpless as infants; and that, despite all our cherished illusions of control, we are pretty much helpless as infants all the way in-between. And it is doubly troubling that the only way we seem to be able to learn this is when life knocks us flat and tears away from us all those cherished illusions of control.

Jerry Sittser, wonderful Christian writer, tells of coming down with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever at the age of twenty-eight. It is a rare disease and the doctors had trouble diagnosing it. Which meant that by the time they did, he was seriously ill – fever hovering around 105 degrees, eight days in the ICU, liver and kidneys shutting down, heart stopped beating twice, double pneumonia. He was close to death. But it taught him the truth about himself and about life and about the false gods he had been clinging to instead of the one true God. It taught him the truth about his helplessness in this world – and about his great need for the help of the one true God:

I still remember the desperation I felt to get enough air. I would take little gulps, but my lungs kept begging for more. I eventually recovered from the illness and started to breathe normally again. Ironically, I don't need air any less now than I did then. I was simply more aware of it. I was desperate for air, like a drowning man.

The same holds true with my need for God. Whether or not I feel it, my need for God is as great as my need for air, water, and food. Without God, I am dead.⁵

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” The first thing Jesus wants us to understand about the impossible becoming possible regarding who can be saved is that it begins to become possible the moment we give up on our false saviors, and confess to Him our helplessness, confess to Him our true infant-like need for Him.

Because in that moment we also learn a second thing about the impossible becoming possible regarding who can be saved: the even greater truth that in our infant helplessness we are,

all along, being watched over by a Parent who indeed loves us and cares for us – and whom we can truly count on to provide for all our real needs, to protect us in all our weakness, to preserve us in all our struggles and sorrows, victories and joys. And who will raise us up in the end to life eternal, on that day when we die. Once we discover our infant helplessness in this world, we are finally able to discover also that this world is no match for the One who has brought us into being, touched us and blessed us, and who loves us more than we can ever comprehend. That, “*the eternal God is our dwelling place, and beneath us always are the everlasting arms.*”⁶

For that is what Jesus is telling us, telling His disciples, immediately after the encounter with the rich young ruler and immediately after the disciples’ question, “*Then who can be saved?*” That is what Jesus is telling us when He then begins telling the disciples, for the third time, that He is going to Jerusalem to die for our sins, and to be raised up that we might have eternal life. He is telling us that the impossible is indeed possible – simply because His sacrificial love for us has made it so. “*Who then can be saved?*” Well, you and me, and all who have learned – from out of their infant helplessness – to call upon the name of the Lord our God. The One who won’t – like money or mammon or any other false god – the One who won’t let us down in the end.

“*Who then can be saved?*” Let me answer one more time of how the impossible becomes possible – salvation comes – when our helplessness at last meets with His help. It’s a story told by one of my Old Testament professors, a wonderful teacher and even more wonderful Christian by the name of James Luther Mays. He tells of walking in the Virginia mountains and coming upon a small family cemetery. The cemetery contained, among others, the grave of a beloved physician who lived and worked in that area in the early 1800’s. The grave was marked by a four-sided obelisk, with an inscription carved on each of the four faces. As Dr. Mays walked around the obelisk, he read each inscription. On the first side, it read, “*The Lord is my shepherd;*” on the second, “*He restores my soul.*” On the third side, it read, “*I will fear no evil;*” and on the fourth and last, “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*”

Dr. Mays said it was as if that old doctor were speaking still.⁷ Still telling the world of the help that had come to him from God. Still telling the world of the hope he had found in Jesus. Still telling the world that though all earthly treasures had failed him in the end – God had never failed him. Still telling the world that in Jesus Christ a camel can actually pass through the eye of a needle – and that you and I shall be saved, are being saved, and ever more will be saved, by the One whose help, alone, is sufficient for our helplessness. By the love and grace of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

¹ Helmut Thielicke, “Venturing the Harder Road,” in Life Can Begin Again: Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 179.

² John Ortberg, When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 99.

³ Quoted in Gordon MacDonald, A Resilient Life (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004), p. 42.

⁴ Arthur Simon, How Much Is Enough? (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), p. 65.

⁵ Jerry Sittser, When God Doesn’t Answer Your Prayer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 43.

⁶ Deuteronomy 33:27.

⁷ James L. Mays, Preaching and Teaching the Psalms (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 117-118.