

Introduction

For all the years we have lived in Wisconsin I have been dissatisfied with my TV reception. On almost every channel the signal would get lost now and then. And that is really frustrating when it happens in the middle of a big Clemson game. For years now I have jumped up and started turning the dial on that cheap set of rabbit ears I bought when we first got here. Well, enough is enough. A couple weeks ago up in Sheboygan we were watching the game with amazing clarity for being so far away. I took note of my son's antenna and decided I needed a new one. So I did a little research and spent a little more money than I did on those rabbit ears. This week I received the antenna and connected it and what a difference. No more signal lost. I wish I had done it a long time ago. Sometimes you are satisfied with what you have because you do not think anything can really be any better. And sometimes you pay a considerable price because, well, it is just worth it. The kingdom of Heaven is the consummate one of those things. It will cost you everything, but it is more than worth it. This fact is brought to our attention as we turn our attention to the aftermath of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler.

[Read Text and Pray]

This text focuses on entrance into the kingdom of heaven but also what is there for those who do enter in. The facts that emerge as Jesus engages with his disciples turn the spotlight on the glory and grace of God. God overcomes what is impossible with people to bring them by his doing into his kingdom. And with the blessings of the kingdom, God eclipses by far whatever human cost is involved in entering. So while our attention will zero in on entrance into the kingdom and the blessings of the kingdom, the main message or main idea of this text is that the grace and generosity of our God are amazing. The grace and generosity of God are amazing. They call us to gratitude and worship. They call us to sacrifice.

We start by observing . . .

I. The Impossibility

It is IMPOSSIBLE for a person to enter the kingdom of God who is trusting in or depending upon what they can do to get in. It is IMPOSSIBLE for a person to enter the kingdom of God who is trusting in or depending upon what they can do to get in. Human beings can do NOTHING to save themselves.

The rich young ruler has departed from his encounter with Jesus. He had approached with the appearance of humility and genuine desire for eternal life, but when he learned that it would cost him everything he held dear in this world, he did not hang around. He went away sorrowful for he had great possessions.

Jesus then turned to his disciples. He sought their most earnest attention. That is the function of "Truly I say to you." He was urging them not to miss what he was about to say. And what he had to say to them in essence was this, "It is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

The ESV translation says, "only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven." The more literal New American Standard says, "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." The point is that it is difficult or hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom. Jesus goes on to explain

just how difficult it is. It is so hard; it is so difficult that it cannot be done. It is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus makes the point with an illustration drawn from everyday Jewish lingo. It was a common expression among the Jews. They would compare that which is impossible to the possibility of a camel (the largest animal in the region) to go through the eye of a needle (the smallest imaginable opening). In Persia the saying was that "it was easier for an elephant to go through the eye of a needle." The idea that Jesus was speaking of a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem where a camel could barely fit through is contrived and does not fit the context. Jesus is not describing something that is barely possible but something that is not possible at all.

My mother was a seamstress. So was my mother-in-law. I am not. But on a few occasions I have needed to use a needle and thread. It is the dickens to get the thread into the needle's eye. Jesus places before the imagination of his disciples and us the thought of trying to get not merely a strand of thread but a camel through the little hole in the head of a needle. Anything that is more difficult than that isn't going to happen. This is not about something that is very, very difficult. Rather he was declaring the absolute impossibility of a person entering the kingdom of heaven on their own terms and based on their own efforts.

Jesus made the point by saying that not even the rich can get in the kingdom that way. He was addressing the faulty mindset that pervaded Jewish understanding and was itself something his own disciples did not yet clearly grasp. Jewish understanding in general was that wealth was an indication of divine blessing in a person's life. In addition, wealthy individuals were better equipped to perform works that pleased God, like buying the better sacrifices to be offered, giving a greater amount of charity, helping the poor, and making larger donations at the Temple. In the Jewish mind, the rich had a step up on everybody when it came to attempting to get in to heaven. However, Jesus said, "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." It is like us saying, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for Michael Phelps (Olympic champion swimmer) to swim from Los Angeles to Honolulu." If Michael Phelps can't make it from LA to Honolulu, then who can? That is precisely the way the disciples responded to Jesus. If it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a RICH person to get into heaven, "Who then can be saved?" The disciples have grasped what he has said. He has their attention. They see that his focus is on human ability and human resources. And Jesus looks at them and says, "With man this is impossible." That is his point.

Based on human effort and based on the human predicament, if left to himself, no person even wants God, the true God, the thrice Holy God. Left to oneself one's mind is set on the flesh and is hostile to God; it does submit to God's law nor can it, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. The best that humans can do before God is produce filth and corruption. Our prayers are tainted. Our thoughts are polluted. Our most stunning acts of selflessness are marred by impure motives. And our feigned devotion to God is spotted with dross. Jesus had just instructed the young ruler that God is holy. This is why, left to himself, his doing some deed good enough to gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven was an utter impossibility. And it is just as impossible for you and for me.

Now just a side note about wealth—wealth and riches definitely can impede a person in their pursuit of the kingdom. Riches can be very dangerous. It is not because wealth is itself evil. It is not wealth but the love of wealth. Christ's followers must be careful not to allow their lives to get wrapped up in obtaining wealth, preserving wealth, and finding their value and worth in it. The love

of money is a root of all sorts of evil. We must seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Clearly the young ruler had great wealth and he was unwilling to part with it. Riches were his idol.

But, like many, he also thought there was nothing HE could do to gain eternal life. Correcting this common misconception was Jesus' concern in speaking of a camel going through the eye of a needle. HE could not overcome his sin problem. HE was without qualified resources to bring reconciliation between him and God that would gain him entrance to the presence of the Lord. Human beings can do nothing to save themselves. It goes for the rich and the poor and the in-between. We must come to the understanding that with man, entering the kingdom of heaven is impossible.

Next, Jesus declares . . .

II. The Possibility

What is impossible with man is nevertheless possible. With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Sinful human beings CAN enter the kingdom of God. They CAN be saved. They CAN have eternal life. They CAN know God. It is because of GOD. The Bible has been given to proclaim that there is mercy with God. He has determined to rescue sinners who deserve eternal hell from that destiny and to bring them into a relationship with him in which they are forgiven, cleansed, and perfected. It is a relationship of reconciliation and redemption, of sanctification and adoption. It is a relationship in which the dividing wall of sin is broken down and overcome. It is a relationship in which the debt that was owed to God for sins committed is paid. It is a relationship of security in which those who are brought to God will be kept eternally by God. It is a relationship which magnifies the grace and the glory of God because God has accomplished for sinners what otherwise is impossible.

One of the outstanding examples of God's performing what is impossible by human means is the birth of Jesus. Here is just one point at which what is impossible with man but necessary for man to be right with God is accomplished by God. We needed a savior. He had to be one of us yet not one of us—human but not a descendant of Adam and thus a sinner. He had to be a descendant of David. In the fullness of time God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so we might receive adoption as sons. In the fullness of time the angel Gabriel was dispatched to announce to a virgin that she would conceive and bear a son who would be Son of the Most High. He would save his people from their sins. The angel explained the miraculous nature of Mary's conception, how without relations with a man, she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. And moreover, Mary's aged and barren relative also had miraculously conceived. He explained it like this: "For nothing will be impossible with God." Mary knew that humanly speaking it was impossible for a virgin to conceive. She also knew that humanly speaking it was impossible for a barren and aged woman to conceive. But human impossibility is divine opportunity. And the result is the display of the grace of God, the power of God, and the glory of God.

The disciples of Jesus themselves were still learning. They still had a ways to go. This much is true; they had given up everything to follow Christ, but they were still coming to learn all that it means. They were still in Christ's school of theology. At this point Jesus was bringing them a step closer to understand that salvation cannot be attained by the effort of man; for that is impossible. But it can be attained by human beings because what is impossible with man is not impossible with God.

The Bible is a museum of portraits of God stepping into the situation of what is impossible with man and overcoming that impossibility by his glorious grace. He invades humanity's hopelessness and acts in contradiction to that hopelessness to work wonders. Each of those portraits point to the

great and consummate work of God when Jesus hung on the cross. There the very God/man who knew NO sin accomplished the otherwise impossible. He made peace with God where humanity had no hope of making peace. He became sin in the place of humans so that in him humans might become the righteousness of God. He is the way the truth and the life, and if you desire to come to the Father, if you desire to enter the kingdom, you must come through him. You must receive his merciful and gracious work there on the cross as God's Son and God's lamb, sacrificed for you.

It is impossible for any human to pave that way by any good deed or effort of our own. But what we could not do and the law could not do, God did by sending his own Son.

There is no other way of entry into the kingdom of God but through the Son he has provided. Jesus is not one of many ways. He is the only way. He is God's only provision. He is God's provision to make possible what is otherwise impossible. Praise God for his great grace!!! He offers eternal life as a gift. For you to obtain that life, you must receive it as such by faith.

While God has made the impossible possible, there is a cost associated with receiving the gift.

III. The Cost of Following Christ

Lodged in Peter's mind was the thing Jesus had said as he exhorted the young ruler. Jesus had told the rich man to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor and have treasure in heaven and come and follow him. That is when he turned away. Peter, still mulling this over in his mind, says to Jesus, "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Jesus promised the rich man treasure if he would leave everything and follow. While that man had turned away, Peter and the others had not. They were not rich, but THEY HAD left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus had made no bones about it. You can't serve two masters. You can't come to him for salvation as an add-on to pursuing life according to your own desires and dreams. He had said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Back in Matthew 10:37-39, Jesus had preached about the cost. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." We think of the parable of the hidden treasure. Here a man discovers a treasure hidden in a field. And in his joy he goes and sells ALL he has to buy the field and gain the treasure. Think also of the parable of the costly pearl. A pearl merchant finds one pearl of great value and sells all he has to buy it.

To enter Christ's kingdom will cost you. It must be your pearl your treasure, the one thing that outstrips the worth of everything else. To receive the gift of entry to God's kingdom, your heart must be so consumed with that gift that you let go of everything else for it. The gate that leads to life is narrow.

Entry to the kingdom of heaven is not something you strap on to everything else you pursue in this life. The kingdom of God must be THE THING you pursue. Turning your back on economic pursuits, social pursuits, personal pursuits, fleshly pursuits, you must long for salvation more than anything else such that there is no sacrifice too big for the sake of following Christ. All that is gain to you must become rubbish in view of the surpassing value of seeking and knowing and gaining Christ Jesus. Do not fool yourself if you are trying to have Christ and everything else. Like Peter and the other disciples, you and I must leave everything to follow Christ.

IV. The Reward of Following Christ

Jesus had made a striking statement to the young ruler. He had said to sell what he had, give to the poor, and he would have treasure in heaven. It seems that as Peter is considering the fact that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Christ, he considers that they did not leave as much as this young ruler would have. They were not rich and did not have as much to leave, to sacrifice, or to give to the poor. Remember what Jesus had said to the disciples when he called them to follow? To the fishermen he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." To the tax collector, he had simply said, "Follow me." But to the young ruler he had promised treasure in heaven. So it seems natural for Peter to wonder what they would have.

Jesus' reply is mind-blowing. It starts with a solemn utterance of assurance: "Truly I say to you." He is not reticent or hesitant to grant to the disciples a promise of great blessing and honor to be given to them. They have just seen a guy who by the world's standards bears all the marks of success. He no doubt has the respect and regard of the people. But his wealth is passing away. His honor will quickly fade and he will have nothing. Not so with those who follow Jesus.

Jesus points beyond this world to the new heavens and the new earth. Christ's followers will enjoy his direct and righteous and glorious rule. Here we are friends in an election cycle that is as pivotal as any I remember. The stakes are high. The issues matter. The future of the United States as a freedom-loving and freedom-enjoying nation hangs in the balance. And I get as concerned as anyone about the possibilities that lay before us. But this I know and you need to bear it in mind as well. Whatever happens in this nation is temporary. The kingdom of heaven will eventually rule over all. Do your civic duty in this world but do not let your concern over this country and this governmental system eclipse your love for and longing for the consummation of the kingdom of heaven. There the followers of Christ will share in its authority. Do not let people like the rich young ruler in this world distract you from what is truly important and what truly matters. All the wealth and power and authority of Christ will belong also to those who have followed him.

And that is not all. "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will have eternal life." You cannot give up anything to follow Jesus that will not be returned into your lap more richly, more wonderfully, more meaningfully, and more abundantly in heaven. A foretaste is granted here and now in the joy and satisfaction of knowing the Lord and belonging to his eternal family. From time to time it is good for the followers of Christ to ponder the glory and blessing both now and to come. The result is hope and joy and praise to God.

Conclusion

I mentioned at the outset how the main idea of this section of Matthew's gospel is the fact that the grace and generosity of God are amazing. The merciful way by which he works to make our impossible his possible is mind-blowing. And on top of his mercy is the fact of how God has lavished upon his people the riches of his grace. Such a display calls for us to praise God and exult in his glory like the Apostle Paul as he began his epistle to the Ephesians. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." This is a chorus in which we need to join our hearts and engage our lives. It is a chorus whose consolations will cheer our souls even when the cares of our hearts are many.

