

Luke 18:18-30

¹⁸A certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁹Jesus asked him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good, except one—God. ²⁰You 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.’”

²¹“I have kept all these since I was a child,” he said.

²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²³But when the ruler heard these words, he became very sad, because he was very rich.

²⁴When Jesus saw that the man became very sad, he said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶Those who heard this said, “Then who can be saved?”

²⁷He replied, “What is impossible for people is possible for God.”

²⁸And Peter said, “Look, we have left our possessions and followed you.”

²⁹He said to them, “Amen I tell you: Anyone who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰will most certainly receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life.”

Possible or Impossible?

I.

If you would ask me to write a book report and summarize this particular book of the author I am currently reading, I would say, “no.” That’s not a refusal to do the book report, that’s more or less the whole book report. Nearly 300 pages the author used to say “no” to the subject he was writing about.

It’s getting close to Reformation time again, so perhaps some of you might have guessed my book report is on a book by Martin Luther. The book he wrote is titled in English: *The Bondage of the Will*.

The book came about because a theologian named Erasmus claimed that people have free will. He wasn’t just claiming that people have the free will to go here or there, or to choose a spouse, or make a choice between two options. Erasmus was saying that people have free will to choose to do good, especially where it concerns doing good before God. His claim was that people could choose to do this in order to *become* Christian.

Luther disagreed. In fact, he disagreed so strongly that he completely turned the suggestion on its head and proposed that it is *impossible* to choose to do good before God—at least, for the natural, unconverted self.

When Luther wrote his book, he addressed it to Erasmus. I doubt Doctor Luther had any illusions that he was going to change Erasmus’ mind. Why did he write his book, then? Why put pen to paper and go into such a lengthy discussion of free will or the lack thereof when the person you are speaking to isn’t going to budge?

II.

“A certain ruler asked Jesus, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Luke 18:18, EHV). Luther couldn’t read minds, but Jesus could. Jesus knew the heart of this ruler.

Jesus answered anyway. He listed some commandments. Not all of them, but the ones he listed were all commandments about how we are to treat fellow human beings: adultery, murder, stealing, preserving the reputation—the good name—of others, honoring father and

mother.

“I have kept all these since I was a child,” he said” (Luke 18:21, EHV). I have a confession to make. If you come to me in my office and claim to have always kept these kinds of commandments, I will at least have some more questions for you. I might ask you what you mean. I might even laugh out loud if you say something like that in my office.

Mark, in his account of what happened on this day, says: “Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said to him...” (Mark 10:21, EHV). If you were in my office claiming to have kept all the commandments since you were young, I surely would have the same attitude Jesus did to this rich ruler. I would love you. I would want you to come to realize that you *hadn't* kept all these commandments perfectly. I would probably pull out my catechism and start showing you Luther's “What does this mean?” section of each commandment and the passages that show that God's Moral Law for all people wants far more than a superficial keeping of the law that the rich man was really claiming to have done.

Jesus, in his love for this rich ruler, didn't do any of that. He said: “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22, EHV). Jesus' instruction to the rich ruler was designed to show the man that, while he *claimed* to have kept *all* God's Commandments, he hadn't even kept the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods.” The *things* the man owned, his vast holdings, his money, his property, his 401k, whatever the riches were, occupied first place in his heart above God.

“But when the ruler heard these words, he became very sad, because he was very rich” (Luke 18:23, EHV). His actions confirmed it. Jesus' gentle, loving instruction did not penetrate the man's hardened heart—at least, not at that time. We would hope and pray that he thought things through later and came around and understood what Jesus had been telling him.

III.

Luther, when he wrote *The Bondage of the Will*, didn't really think he would get Erasmus to understand or agree that we can't choose God, or do anything truly good before God, unless God has already worked in our hearts and we have faith that believes in Jesus. He wrote his book anyway, because there were so many other people who *would* be led to realize that none of us can please God unless God first brings us to faith in Jesus.

When Jesus addressed the rich ruler in the way that he did, it wasn't only for the ruler's sake. Other people had something to learn, too.

As the rich ruler walked away, Jesus said: “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24-25, EHV).

Some commentators have tried to explain Jesus' words away a little bit. They have said there was a certain gate in the city walls that was so narrow that a camel had to have all its packs unloaded before it could squeeze through. I wasn't there. I don't know what kind of gates the city had, or how narrow they might have been. I *do* know that the disciples and others listening in to the conversation didn't think Jesus was talking about something that was merely extremely difficult.

“Those who heard this said, “Then who can be saved?”” (Luke 18:26, EHV). Even though none of the accounts of this incident between Jesus and the rich ruler give us any information about the man, this question seems to imply that he might have been a very respected individual. His behavior might already have been known as being exemplary. “Then who can be saved?” If *this* fellow isn't good enough, which one of the rest of us stands

a chance?

Jesus agrees. “He replied, ‘What is impossible for people is possible for God’” (Luke 18:27, EHV). It is impossible for people to be saved on their own.

Back to Luther’s “The Bondage of the Will.” After Adam and Eve fell into sin, human ability to choose good over evil, to choose to follow God, was irreparably damaged. No person can do it. Adam and Eve’s first child was born “in *their* image,” rather than in the image of God, the way their parents had been created. After sin, every single one of us is born with a sinful nature. Choosing God, being good enough for God, even being good enough to have God give you any consideration, is impossible. Jesus says so.

But it is possible for God.

When the rich ruler first asked his question, Jesus fired back a question of his own: “Why do you call me good? No one is good, except one—God” (Luke 18:19, EHV). It wasn’t common for a person to say: “good teacher.” Typically one would start their question by saying: “teacher.”

The rich ruler changed the form of address and added the qualifier “good.” Was he trying to butter Jesus up? Was he hoping that his form of address would get Jesus to give him a pat on the back and tell him what a good job he had already been doing and how certain he was to attain eternal life?

We don’t know, but Jesus drew attention to that word “good.” Then Jesus drew attention to the fact that only one is good: God. Coincidentally, the same thing Luther was saying about a person’s will. We aren’t good enough to choose God. Only God is truly good.

As for the rich ruler, the One standing before him actually *was* good. The One standing before him was God himself. The One standing before him was the God for whom he should set aside all his riches and bow down before in thanksgiving that Jesus had come to pay for his sins.

What was impossible for the ruler, and for us, was totally possible for Jesus. *He* took all sins—not just the sins of one individual, but the sins of the entire world—to the cross to pay for them. He made the impossible possible by his death on the tree of the cross.

IV.

“Peter said, ‘Look, we have left our possessions and followed you’” (Luke 18:28, EHV). In chapel on Wednesday I might have said Peter started bragging about he and the other disciples giving up their possessions. I at least asked if that *might* be the case. As you read Jesus’ response, I don’t think so.

“He said to them, ‘Amen I tell you: Anyone who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰will most certainly receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life’” (Luke 18:29-30, EHV). Jesus did *not* tell Peter he had a long way to go in understanding his salvation completely. Though Peter would face some troubles at Jesus’ trial, Peter *did* have faith. So did the others. They were *not* relying on themselves and their supposed good works to save them, they were looking to Jesus.

Instead, Jesus points us to the great blessings that God promises to his believers. Last week we noted that God promises that we can come to him in confidence, asking in prayer things that are according to his will. God has promised that he will always be with us and never forsake us. He has assured us of the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus as our greatest gift, which gives us also the promise of eternal life to come in heaven with him.

Possible or impossible? For people, totally impossible. Because of God’s promises, not even just possible, but certain. Amen.