

Mark 10:23-31

A lot of Christians hear this text and think to themselves, “Boy, I’m glad I’m not rich! A rich person has less of a chance of being saved than a camel getting through the eye of a needle!” But it would have been helpful, don’t you think, had Jesus defined the word, “rich.” Maybe if He had said something like, “a person who makes more than one million dollars a year,” or “a person whose net worth exceeds one million dollars.” But He gives no such definition. And this leaves room for a wide range of interpretations. Compared to some, you are dirt poor. But compared to others, you are filthy rich. Do the odds of getting into heaven increase the less money you make? Do your odds of making it go down the more wealth you acquire? This may be one text that we Christians do not like to discuss. It makes us uncomfortable. It makes it seem as though our salvation is directly tied to what we possess. And we like our possessions. We work hard to get ahead, not to get behind.

Jesus’ disciples worked hard, too. A number of them were fishermen. They were not rich by any stretch of the imagination. But they got the point of what Jesus was saying. And we today are wise if we listen to their response. “*Then who can be saved?*” they cried in astonishment. Notice they did not say, ‘Then how can the rich be saved?’ They wondered how anyone could be saved.

We wonder just the opposite. “How can anyone not be saved?” We take issue with Jesus’ own words. We would say it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person to go to hell. Most people have some good in them, we think. And the vast majority of people have heard of Jesus. Of all the funeral services held throughout this year in every place, the mourners certainly believe their loved one is in heaven. You will never hear the preacher say, “Well, sorry folks, but it doesn’t look good for old man Johnson here; he didn’t make it to heaven.” “How can you say that?” would be the reaction. “How dare you judge him! You don’t know that he perished.” Why is it that people can say with certainty that their loved ones made it to heaven, but God forbid anyone say with certainty that they didn’t? Is everyone, by default, going to heaven, and only the rare exception changes their destination? The disciples got it, and they were right there with Jesus: How is it possible, they cried, for anyone, rich, or poor, or middle class, Democrat or Republican, old, young, or middle age, good, bad, or mediocre, for anyone to be saved?

Now the answer Jesus gives should do two things. It should terrify us. And it should comfort us. You are correct, He says. You get the point of what I am saying. Not, “Well then, I’ve got to try harder to be saved! If it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, then I’ve got to reach down and give it all I’ve got if I want to be saved.” No, He says, You’re right. It is impossible to be saved. No one can be saved. With men, this is a flat-out impossibility.

This means no one is good enough to get into heaven. It means that if we are hoping to squeak into heaven by wiggling through a crack in the door, it’s not going to happen. Anyone, us included, who hopes to enter heaven because of something good and decent within them, or that they have done, might as well buy a camel and start pushing it through a needle.

So if no one is able to get into the kingdom of heaven, then it’s time for us to turn away from all that we think is good about us. It’s time for us to look at what we have done in life, and not believe that it’s good enough, but fall down before God in dread over our sins pleading for mercy. But most people do not want to do this. We do not like doing this. Most people think that camel will eventually make it through. They’re not concerned...at least they do not show it. But Jesus’ words stand fast...”*With man, it is impossible* to be saved.”

And yet, friend, He also says this, *“But not with God. For all things are possible with God.”* When Jesus’ friend, Lazarus, died, he was in the tomb four days before Jesus arrived. What were the odds of Lazarus walking out of that tomb on his own? What were the odds of someone, other than Jesus, bringing Lazarus back to life? They would have a better chance with a camel and a needle. The odds were impossible. Dead men do not come back to life. A body rotting and stinking in the tomb has no chance, no possibility of coming to life. Not with men, that is. But with a word, *“Lazarus, come out,”* Jesus raised him to life. What is impossible for men is possible for God.

And that is why we gather here today. Not just to praise God, we are here because God does the impossible. Here stands the baptismal font before our eyes. Here is the Sacrament on the altar. Here is the lectern where God’s Word is read. Here is the pulpit where it is preached. With a word, Jesus did the impossible. He called Lazarus from death to life. And He is doing that same impossible work today right here in your midst, and for you through these things. You who were born dead in sin, God through Holy Baptism, called to life in His Son. You who have no chance of being saved by what you do and by how you live, have here a God who saves you by His grace. It is not possible for men to repent of their sins, to come here to God’s House, hear His word of forgiveness and believe that word. It is not possible for us--we can’t do it on our own--but God is doing it for you each and every Sunday morning.

There are some of us who may think that they are outside the realm of possibility, even for God. “Pastor, my life is beyond help. I have thought the worst thoughts. I have said terrible words. And what I’ve done is beyond forgiving. God would never have mercy on me. He would never take me to heaven.” Friend, consider Peter who denied his Lord. Consider the woman caught in adultery whom Jesus forgave. Consider St. Paul who murdered Christians. Consider the thief on the cross who today is with Christ in heaven. With each of these sinful people God did the impossible. And He still does what is impossible with you. Consider Jesus. How is it possible for God to take on human flesh and become man? How is it possible for the holy God to suffer and die on a cross for His sinful creatures? But this is what God did. His mercy makes the impossible, possible.

And this mercy is here for you now. No matter how impossible you have been. No matter how sinful, how far you have wandered from your God, how wicked your thoughts, words, and deeds, right now God gives you His word of grace and assurance. For Jesus’ sake He forgives you. In Christ, heaven is yours. It is His gift to you. He does this because with Him, nothing is impossible. Amen.