

Mark 10:17-27

*It Is Impossible to Save Yourself. But God Can*

“Why It’s Almost Impossible to Juggle 15 Balls” - that was the title of the video that came across my YouTube feed the other day. Now I don’t have any special or even general interest in juggling, but I clicked on the video because of the reaction I had to the title (which, yes, I’m aware is how they get you!). But I read that statement (why it’s almost impossible to juggle 15 balls) and I thought to myself, “No WAY!” Having thought about it all of half of a second I thought to myself, “if someone can juggle 14 balls, with some more practice they can juggle 15. Just throw them a little higher. Difficult? I’m sure. Impossible. No way.”

So I watched the video. All 15 minutes of it. I’ll admit, it was pretty interesting in a juggling-explanation-video kind of way. To save you the time, here’s the cliff notes version. Between the speed your hands have to move to get 15th balls in the air before the 1<sup>st</sup> is coming down, and the accuracy in throwing the balls (not only in getting them to fall within a catch zone, but more importantly being able to throw them in a way that doesn’t hit the other 14) and difficulty of holding 8 balls in one hand in a way that allows you to throw them quickly and accurately...the picture started to become clear. For those who’ve spent all lot of time practicing and thinking about such things, they say between all those factors, they find it difficult to envision anyone being able to do 15. They left a little wiggle room in the title...why it’s ALMOST impossible...but still.

I bring it up this morning because thinking about the account from Mark 10 this morning, my reaction struck me as important. You see, I had absolutely no business making a skeptical judgment about the claim. I know next to nothing about juggling. And yet there I was doubting the claim of impossibility with all the stubborn arrogance of, well, a typical human being. Someone says, “you can’t” and humans naturally say, “just watch me.”

Today our Savior makes a claim of impossibility...that it is impossible for people to do what it takes to inherit eternal life. Yet from the beginning of the fall into sin, humans have bristled at that thought. From the time of the fall into sin right down to today...in the hearts seated before me this morning...humans say, “just watch me.”

And so we are reminded this morning in no uncertain terms that such thinking is foolish and arrogant. That such thinking which is all too prevalent in our hearts and minds needs to be exposed and condemned. And in it’s place must arise a humble acceptance what Jesus teaches us this morning: it is impossible to save yourself...but God can.

We learn that lesson from Jesus’ encounter in Mark 10 with a young man who stopped him along his way on a journey to get the ultimate answers from the ultimate

teacher of truth. **As Jesus was setting out on a journey, one man ran up to him and knelt in front of him. He asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** That’s a good question, isn’t it? It’s a really good question in fact. It’s a question each person should be asking in their lives because it’s a question centered around the ultimate issues: God, death, and eternity. **What must I do to inherit eternal life?** Really good question!

Now if Jesus had wanted to get to the point with the man as he ends up doing with his disciples a few verses later, the answer he could have rightly give was. *You can’t. There is nothing you can do inherit eternal life. It is impossible.*

But Jesus, the master teacher, wanted to show the man WHY such a statement would be true, rather than just asserting it. So instead he **said to him ...you know the commandments.** as if to say, if you want to be with God...if you want eternal life...here’s the expectations God has for you. **You know the commandments.**

That should have been enough. Right? That should have been all it took for that man to look at his life and hold it up to the commands and expectations of God and while still on bended knee cry out that he had failed miserably. That should have been enough. And the conversation would have turned out very differently.

But with confidence **the man replied, “Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child.”**

And therein lies the problem: our sinful nature has made us so arrogant we don’t think it IS impossible to do enough to inherit eternal life. I mean, we know this man’s claim was untrue. (no one’s kept God’s commands perfectly). But sadly we understand how he got there...because those same self-delusions arise in our hearts. We too take pride in all the ways we think we can claim we’ve kept God’s commands, **‘You shall not murder.** (I’ve never unlawfully killed someone. Check.) **You shall not commit adultery.** (I’ve never had sex with anyone who’s not my wife. Check); And then we diminish the severity of any actual infractions **You shall not steal.** (never...well not of consequence anyway...a few bucks from my parents...what’s the harm really?) **You shall not give false testimony** (little white lie don’t count, right?!) Add all that together with our tendency to compare ourselves to other and take comfort that we haven’t done what they’ve done and to feel more righteous by comparison! All of it leaves us with this persistent feeling like we’re doing alright by God.

<sup>21</sup>Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said to him, **“One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”** <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he looked sad and went away grieving, because he had great wealth. <sup>23</sup>Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, **“How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!”**

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't dispute the man's delusions. He simply pinpoints an area that unambiguously shows the dishonesty of the man's claims. The man may have imagined he had kept the commandments, but he hadn't even kept the first, **"You shall have no other gods before me."** This young man had been tremendously blessed by the Lord. He had great wealth. But that wealth had become his highest priority. And he was unwilling to part with it to follow God and his call. The great blessings God had given him became a god unto themselves and became for him a hindrance to faith.

Like that man, sinful human beings are these walking contradictions. Unable to save ourselves, convinced we CAN...so unaware of the most basic violations against God's law...idolatry so prevalent in our lives we hardly even recognize it.

To confront the delusions of our own heart, the first commandment is as good a place to start as it was for that man. We too have been blessed with great wealth. But in a world where phones, cars, houses, abundant options of food are taken for granted, such blessings pose a danger.

In Luther's discussion of the first commandment, he notes that word for God in German (Gott) is, like in English, derived from the word for "good". That a god is something to which we look for our good. I think that's a helpful way to think about idolatry. When we look to something other than God for the good we seek, that thing has become an idol...a false god in our hearts.

So when you look to your gold more than God to give you peace of mind...that's an idol. When you look to your gadgets more than God to give you a feeling of completeness and fulfillment, those are idols. When you look to goals more than God to determine how to spend your time and your energy, those are idols.

Do you ever feel like you never have enough? Is it the size of the retirement account that makes you feel confident about the future...or the lack of size that makes you feel anxious? Has pursuing more treasure become all consuming in your life? Are you taking time to do what's important? Pray...serve...worship? Or have you viewed your time as a possession that's all yours? Have you filled your schedule so full that the more important tasks are frequently left undone?

There is a reason this prayer is included in the wisdom literature of Proverbs, **Do not give me poverty or riches. Give me food in the amount that is right for me. Too much, and I may feel satisfied and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?"** Because when your blessings become idols, they actually destroy faith

How true Jesus saying, **How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" 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.**

How true also the disciples reaction, **They were ... astonished and said to one another, "Who then can be saved?"**

Who then can be saved? Impossible...for us. But not for our almighty and all loving God.

Did you notice how Jesus was described before he pressed that young man about his wealth? **Jesus looked at him [and] loved him.** He wasn't trying to shame him or embarrass him. He was trying to help him. He was trying to expose the self-righteous and idolatrous sin in his heart so that that man could turn to him as the only answer. You know, when you go to a doctor for a check-up, he begins to poke, prod, and press, all the while asking, "Does this hurt? How about this?" If you cry out in pain, one of two things has happened. Either the doctor has pushed too hard, without the right sensitivity. Or, more likely, there's something wrong, and the doctor will say, "We'd better do some more tests. It's not supposed to hurt there!" So it is when we're confronted by the great physician through his word or in worship...some of our hearts cry out in discomfort when the façade of self-righteousness comes crashing down...when our idolatry has been exposed. To which Jesus is here in love to say, "You need some help because it's not supposed to hurt there."

**Who then can be saved? ... For people, it is impossible, but not for God, because all things are possible for God."**

The man had gone away sad because he didn't wait to hear the good news Jesus was ready to offer if he had humbled himself. We selfish and self-righteous sinners who lie to ourselves about our spiritual condition all while taking God's very own blessings and perverting them into our own twisted idols...we have a God who can overcome such seemingly impossible sin. For with him nothing is impossible!

That was what Jesus was there to do in the first place. He was there to show sinfully self-righteous sinners how to inherit eternal life. Jesus says I'll save you. See your sin for what it is and then give it to me. Give me your greed, your laziness, your selfishness, your misplaced priorities, your timidity and fear, your self-delusions and I will nail them to the cross, right along with myself. And then I will rise from death to proclaim to you that yours sins have been paid for and that you are now right with God...not of yourself...but through me.

Jesus makes the impossible possible. In Christ, we humbly accept the limits of our own goodness and marvel at the limitlessness of his own put to work on our behalf to save us.

I don't know about juggling 15 balls at one time. But I do know this. It's impossible to save yourself. Jesus not only said it, but his law exposes the truth of it. But nothing is impossible for our Savior God who by his own goodness has rescued us and won us eternal life. **What must I do to inherit eternal life?** Nothing, because Jesus has done it for you. Amen.

