The Impossible Made Possible

Luke 18:18-30 (NIV)

18 A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is
good—except God alone. 20 You 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 "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. 22 When Jesus heard this, he said
to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 23
When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter
the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of
God." 26 Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" 27 Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God." 28 Peter
said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" 29 "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or
sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come
eternal life."

Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:16-17) What's up with these kids getting into the kingdom of God? Luke describes these children as babies, those nursing from their mothers. How can the kingdom of God belong to them? They haven't done anything yet! They just eat and sleep and make dirty diapers. Everything has been done for them at this point in their lives. That can't possibly be how you get the kingdom of God!

Thoughts like these may have prompted a certain ruler to come up to Jesus immediately after he said this to ask him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (verse 18) These kids get it. How do I get it?

Jesus answered, "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone." (verse 19) What a curious answer. Jesus doesn't immediately answer his question but says something that almost sounds like an aside to challenge the man's notion of what is good and what or who is Jesus. Is Jesus an authoritative teacher on what is good (and nothing more) or is he actually good himself – because only God is good.

When we say "good," we mean above average, better than okay. Is that how God defines "good"? Going back to the beginning, Genesis chapter 1, "good" is not an adjective describing something better than okay. It's describing something that is right and proper and true and pleasing. When God says something is "good," he's saying that it's perfect.

So, if you want an answer from an authority on being good, God lays it out for us with his commandments. Jesus continued, "You 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.'" (verse 20) The man answered back, "All these I have kept since I was a boy." (verse 21)

Really? Maybe some of you met this man's response with skepticism. If you did, it's probably because you looked beyond the surface level of keeping the commandments. You know that adultery is not just the physical act of sex outside of marriage, but God includes lustful thoughts as acts of adultery. You know that murder extends past the legal definition of the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought, that it includes hating someone in your heart, without or without an action done to them. You know that stealing goes beyond shoplifting but also includes whenever we don't try to improve or protect someone's property or help him or her keep it. You know that false testimony goes beyond lying under oath in a court of law, but it is any time when we use our words to bring down someone's reputation, fail to uphold it, or when we don't take words in the kindest possible way. Honor your father and mother goes beyond verbal and actionable obedience, but it also has to do with our attitude when we obey our parents and respecting them even when we don't deem them as respectable.

If we are going to be "good" by God's standard - which is the only standard that matters in this case of getting eternal life - we will have had to have kept all these aspects of all God's commands for every single second of our lives, from womb to grave. The only way we are "good" by God's definition is if we are lying to ourselves about how well we have kept these commandments.

But the certain ruler hasn't made this realization yet. He thinks he's done it all, but something is still nagging at him, that these babies can be considered heirs of eternal life. If these babies are good enough, why doesn't he feel that he is?

It's for this reason that Jesus moves forward with a custom made command for this certain ruler. "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (verse 22) "When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy." (verse 23) The certain rich ruler recognizes that he's not as good as he thought. Jesus' command showed this ruler that he covets his life of luxury. He wants it all to himself and not share it all with the poor. He's not willing to part with his wealth in order to gain treasure in heaven. He cannot keep this command. He loves his wealth more than his God. He is not good.

If you're still thinking that you're pretty good before God, what would be the custom made command that Jesus would give you? What would he ask you to give up that you are holding on to too tightly, more tightly than you are to God? Would Jesus say to you, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything because you love your stuff more than me. Dump out your alcohol. Give up an hour or two of sleep on Sunday morning. Give up your dog, your cat. Give up your job. Give up that boyfriend or girlfriend. Give up your son, your daughter because you love that more than God." What is the thing that when it comes down to it, you would become very sad if you had to choose God over that? Does it feel impossible for you to give that up if God commanded you to?

That's Jesus' point: to realize that being "good" according to God's commands as impossible. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (verses 24-25) If you want to be good, then you have to keep every command from God at every point of your life without ever stumbling or failing or even doing it less than perfect. That's why it's easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle. It's impossible!

The impossibility of being "good" is hitting not just the certain rich ruler, but it's also everyone else in the crowd around Jesus. Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" (verse 26) In their minds, rich people have all the advantages. They're blessed with wealth because they are good believers. But now they hear that their advantages don't make them good before God. If they don't have an advantage, who can? Those babies from earlier? This is impossible!

This is exactly where Jesus wanted to lead this certain rich ruler as well as everyone else listening. To be good by obeying the laws is an impossible task. It's not difficult. It's not improbable. It's impossible for any of us to be the kind of good, the perfect, that God requires. Jesus put up the impossible tasks of the commandments to get us to this breaking point of crying out, "Who then can be saved?" because Jesus has the answer. Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God." (verse 27)

Jesus takes the impossible and makes it possible. He said it himself, "No one is good – except God alone." (verse 19b) He is the only one who can actually keep all the commands of God at all times during every second and every moment of his life. This is exactly what Jesus did for you. He didn't do it to show you the law so that you can take this on yourself. No, he wanted you to see that he has to do it for you. Only God is good. Only God can do the impossible. The only way we are going to be good, the only way that we are going to inherit eternal life, is to see that God did the impossible for us.

This is the childlike faith commended by Jesus. This is why the kingdom of God belonged to those babies. They had done nothing to deserve or earn the title of good. Instead, they simply trusted that God had done it for them, that God had done the impossible.

God demands the impossible from us but doesn't leave it up to us. He promised to go with the man through giving up his wealth when he invited him to follow him. And Jesus promised that man something greater than anything he or you or me could give up this side of heaven. He guarantees that God has for us a treasure in heaven, a treasure that no one can take from us, that no moth can destroy. Instead of trying and always failing to achieve the impossibility of being good, Jesus says that I give you good right now. Because I have lived the impossible perfect life for you, you are impossibly perfect right now. All your sins, all the times when you have loved something more than me, I paid for that. I kept all God's commands for you in your place. When I washed you in baptism, I not only removed your sins, but I put my perfection on you. I made you an heir of eternal life. By the faith I gave you through water and my Word, you have become like these little children. You are not covered with my impossible perfection because of anything you did, but entirely by what I did for you. You are an heir of eternal life with me.

It's impossible for me or you to be good by us keeping God's commands. But Christ did the impossible. He kept God's commands for us perfectly because he is God and only God is good. Because of what Christ has done, the impossible is not only possible, but it is done in Christ. By the good work of the Good Teacher, we are made impossibly good. Amen.

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Pastor Jonathan Klein
pastorklein@lotvlayton.org