

Mark 10:23-31 – Who Can Be Saved?

We live in a different world than the world of Jesus and His disciples. Perhaps that is rather obvious, but here I am speaking about how we view God and our status before Him. Unlike the words of the Gospel this morning, we marvel not at who can be saved but who won't be saved. Ours is a God who shrugs His shoulders at sin, who welcomes even unbelievers, and in whom everyone shall be saved. To think otherwise is offensive to us. In our diversity loving culture in which everyone is included and no one excluded, the God of Mark's Gospel has no place.

But it does not matter all that much what we think of God. It does matter what God thinks of us. And this will be the revelation of judgment day that will both surprise the world and cause no small amount of consternation. It is shocking to us because we live in a world in which nobody is allowed to fail anymore. We have adopted the T-ball rules for life in which everyone gets as many chances at bat as they want or need, everyone runs the bases, nobody keeps score, and everyone gets a trophy in the end. Those are not the rules of God.

If the rich cannot be saved, who can be saved? The disciples grew up in a world cleanly divided between the haves and the have nots. They expected the rich and powerful to be able to do whatever they wanted and to get away with anything. We are probably not so different in this respect. Where the disciples were in awe of this, we probably resent it. We expect a fair and equal playing field and we expect the rules to bend so that everyone may succeed.

Jesus insists that riches cannot buy salvation – not even someone rich in good works. It is harder for the rich to be saved than a camel to go through the eye of a needle. If the rich cannot be saved, then there is little hope for ordinary people. Or, is there?

Peter is the good Lutheran in the bunch. Well, Jesus, we don't have much money but we gave up everything for you. We followed You when You called us. We have left home and families behind. We go to church most Sundays. We often attend a Bible study. We have brought our kids to catechism classes. We gave up beer money to put something in the plate as well. We may not be perfect but surely even these count for something. Surely there is room for us?

Yet the words of Jesus are blunt. Neither money nor works can purchase salvation. With man it is impossible. Not hard, not difficult, not tedious, but impossible. Jesus refuses to give us a pep talk to try harder, to work smarter, to be holier. None of this will count. Who we are and what we think and what we say and what we do are stained with sin. Thought, word, and deed, we confess. What we do and what we have not done. The evil that was forbidden and the good that we could not. It is not a matter of what you have or what you have given up. Yet what is impossible with man, is not only possible but probable with God. He can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. He can save the guilty sinner and redeem the lost sheep. That is the good news to camels seeking to fly through the eye of a needle.

Our great temptation is to think that we have given up something for God. We give up Sunday mornings. We give up all the fun things in life to follow the commandments. We give our money for the offerings. We give up what we want to do in order to try and do what God wants. Some of us leave a spouse at home and go to church alone. Some of us have sacrificed careers for the sake of the Kingdom. Some of us have faced hard lives, great afflictions, and much sorrow all to remain faithful to God. Does this not count?

Christ will have none of it. None of these things commend you before God and none of these things will count for anything in obtaining your salvation. For whatever you have given up to be faithful to God is nothing compared to what God has done for you. Riches and works count for nothing – only the treasure of Christ and His saving work.

This is not a promise of a reward or a balance scale that will eventually be in your favor. This is about the nature of God's grace and the power of His mercy. Salvation is not for the good or the righteous or even for those who have potential to become good or righteous. It is for the sinner with dirty hands and dirty heart and dirty mind who confesses it all before God. You may think that you have done something or given up something to contribute in some small way to your salvation but God has done it all for you in Christ. Faith rejoices in mercy that cannot be purchased or earned but is freely given in Christ your Savior.

In this way, the first will be last. The haves in this world who trust in themselves and what they have done will end up with nothing. They will be last. Like the rich man last week. Once they find out that they have nothing to give God in exchange for His mercy, they will go away disappointed. And those who think they are last on earth because they are afflicted, wounded, poor, weak, and repentant sinners – they will be first. God will not forget those who confess their sins and plead for mercy just as God will not have mercy on those who confess they are worthy.

So then what? The consequence of grace is not that we do nothing but that the direction of our works is not toward God for His approval but toward our neighbor. Because God has changed our hearts and we don't think in terms of self-interest or a balance scale anymore. We think as a people who have been given more than they deserve. We are not merely grateful but transformed by grace. We love what we once feared and we rejoice in what we once found unthinkable. That God loves sinners and saves us by grace has become the driving force of our lives. We sing "*create in me a clean heart, O God,*" and this is exactly what God has done. Our hearts are new and so in this newness we battle the old Adam in us.

What we do for the sake of Christ and the Gospel is not lost to us. In fact, these things are the only things that last. We love to say you can't take it with you but in one sense we can. Those good works that contribute nothing to our salvation will not be forgotten by God nor do they pass His gaze unnoticed. Faithfulness to God is not without consequence. The Lord who sees all, sees our faithfulness to Him and our efforts to live faithfully in response to the Gospel.

Friends in Christ, the Gospel is always free to you but it cost the Lord Jesus everything in suffering on the cross and in the pain of death. From that suffering, your new life is born. Connected to His death and resurrection in baptism, you are not who you were. You are a new people in Christ, created anew in Christ Jesus for good works. And through these good works You show forth to the world whose you are and what is the everlasting treasure you grasp by faith.

How easy it is to focus on what we think we have sacrificed or given up for the sake of the faith. How tempting it is to think that God is asking too much of us, that the cost of faith is too great. But we are the blessed of the Lord on whom He has lavished His most precious Son. He died for us while we were yet sinners and before we even knew or acknowledged His gracious favor. Yet He esteemed us in love enough to do this and to choose us to be His own children through baptism and to live under Him in His kingdom now and forever. We live now in this generation but as a people who have enjoyed a heritage of faithful generations who went before us, who built where nothing was before and now we have this congregation, who passed on the faith to us making sure there was a pastor here to provide the Word and the Sacraments and whose work and witness has proven faithful.

Why do we marvel so at who will not be saved while the miracle of those who are right now being saved is before us? You, whom God has raised from death through baptism to live in Christ and with Christ. You, who contributed nothing to your salvation but who shows this salvation in words and works that glorify God and help your neighbor. You, who have never known the poverty endured by the Son of God but have been made rich in Him. You, whom the Lord has delighted to call His own, rejoice not in what God has not done or what He has not revealed to you but in what He has done and what He has made known in Christ for you, for your salvation, and for the sake of the whole world.