

October 18, 2015  
Mark 10:23-31

Proper 24b  
Mission: Impossible

*Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Many of you remember the old TV program *Mission: Impossible*, and some of you have become acquainted with it through the more recent movie versions starring Tom Cruise. That's really how I have become acquainted with the *Mission: Impossible*. After some digging, basically, the TV program revolved around an agent, originally by the name of Dan Briggs and later replaced by Jim Phelps, receiving dangerous government assignments. The tagline was a tape recording at the beginning of each show that said, "Your mission, Mr. Briggs (Mr. Phelps), should you decide to take accept it, is..." And then after relaying the message, the tape would self-destruct "in five seconds." The name of the show came, I suppose, because these assignments appeared impossible. They certainly were difficult. However, by the end of every show, Agent Briggs or Phelps and his team of agents had triumphed, had done the "Impossible." I suppose *Mission: Very Difficult* just doesn't have the same zing. Who would watch a TV Series or Movie called that?

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus talks about entering the kingdom of heaven and life as one in that kingdom. In one case, He describes it as very difficult, like the *Mission: Impossible* assignments—not really impossible, but really, really difficult. In another, he describes it as truly impossible, so which one is it?

The question of the day is this: Is the mission just difficult or is it impossible?

Remember from last Sunday what happened immediately before today's text? A rich young man came to Jesus, asking what He must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus truly loves the young man. And this rich young man appears sincere in his request. He has many things right. Certainly he's come to the right person, Jesus. Indeed, he runs to Him. In the Gospel of Mark, it appears that only sincere individuals, with real needs, ever "run" to meet Jesus. A Demon-possessed man ran to Jesus in Mark 5. A leper came quickly to Jesus in Mark 1. Jairus whose daughter was sick came earnestly to Jesus in Mark 5. And unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, he kneels as a sign of respect to Jesus. He addresses Jesus in a very complimentary way, "Good Teacher." It's so complimentary that Jesus uses it to encourage the young man to consider the full implications of what he just said: "Why do you call me 'good'? Only God is good." With this reminder of the First Table of the Law, involving God and his name, Jesus doesn't seem to be criticizing the young man, rather asking if he understands the true implications of his address. It's as if Jesus is saying, "How far are you willing to take this? Do you know who I really am? Are you willing to *confess* who I really am? With not just your lips, but with your *actions*? Are you willing to believe in the impossible? Are you willing to accept just how difficult this mission is?"

The man asks his question: What must he do to inherit eternal life? Our Psalm today states: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word”. Thus, Jesus points to this man to the commandments. The list of commands Jesus gives isn’t exhaustive, nor need it be. It makes the point. The man responds that he has kept these from his youth. Amazingly, Jesus does not contradict him. He goes into no lecture on the fact that we’re all sinners and no one has kept the commandments perfectly. Instead, Jesus loves him and tells him that “you lack one thing; go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Jesus’ “assignment” forces the young man to acknowledge whether or not he can with the our Psalm today, “In the way of your testimonies I delight as *much* as in all riches.” It also challenges him to place Jesus and His mission first, thereby testifying to whether the man gets the full implications of calling Jesus “good.” The man leaves saddened because he had many possessions. Did he go away to do what Jesus said, his sadness merely indicating that he realizes now just how difficult genuine discipleship is? Or does his downcast demeanor indicate a refusal on his part to pursue the path Jesus has laid out? Whatever the case, Jesus turns to His disciples and comments how difficult it is for the rich to enter heaven: “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Difficult! Very Difficult!

This surprises the disciples. Perhaps they assume that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing and therefore an indicator of one’s relationship with God. Money is a good gift from God, but “The love of money is the root all kinds of evils” as St. Paul writes to young Pastor Timothy. How many of us are rich toward God by supporting the preaching of his Gospel? The text as it stands warns us today about the danger of allowing riches to get in the way of our total devotion to God. Riches, rather than always being a sign of God’s favor, can actually get in the way one’s trust in God.

But it gets worse—or at least it appears to. Jesus goes on to teach his disciples a deeper truth.

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how difficult it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.’ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible.’” Humanly speaking no can slip a camel through the eye of a needle. Not only are riches a huge hindrance to entering the kingdom and thus merely difficult, but Jesus says it’s impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And not just the rich! “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answers: it’s impossible for *anyone* to enter the kingdom of heaven on one’s own.

It’s not just riches that can get in the way of heaven. Indeed, “Every good and perfect gift is from above” as James writes. But any of God’s greatest gifts can and often are used by Satan as his greatest temptations and most powerful idols. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me” as Jesus says in Matthew 10, shows that parents, children, and spouses can become idols? How many people forego church because of

their family members, perhaps even a child's hockey tournament? How many leave a church where God's Word is properly taught to join a church that errs in some doctrine because they want their children to have a "better" youth group, a "larger" Sunday School, etc.?

The Gospel account of the rich man serves as a narrative example of our Epistle's warning to *all* believers. "Let us, all of us, therefore strive to enter that rest" and as we urged earlier in the same letter to the Hebrews to "exhort one another every day...that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"—any sin.

The truth is that no one can save himself. It is impossible. And unlike "difficulties," there are not grades of "impossibility." With man, it is simply impossible. With any men, all men, anyone, anywhere. There are no exceptions. No matter what race, no matter how smart, no matter what age, no matter what gender, no matter how rich, no matter how poor. Man cannot and does not do it, not even with a little tiny bit of help from God. It isn't that man does his part and God does His. Man's only in the equation is the impossible. What man brings to the table is the impossible. Man merely brings sin. The only thing men supply is man's need!

No, man needs the God of the possible to do the impossible. "Who can be saved?" Jesus looked at the disciples and said, 'With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.'" For us, it's not just difficult; it can't happen. But with God, nothing shall be impossible.

Are you willing to believe in the impossible? The Gospel is the Good News that God does the impossible for you. He paid the price that was impossible for you to pay. He paid for your sin, my sin, the sin of the whole world. No mere mortal could do that. But with God all things are possible. God became man so that you and I might be saved. In Jesus, God died for you. The impossible is possible with God. Indeed, he and he alone opens stony hearts to believe. He truly can make a camel go through the eye of a needle. Whether you are rich or poor, you believe. You are saved. We confess this truth whenever we say with Luther in the Small Catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." Not only your salvation, but also your conversion is all God's doing. God doing the impossible.

Even though God has done the impossible and redeemed us, paying for all of our sins, even though he has done the impossible and turned our hearts of stone into believing hearts, until we enter fully into the kingdom in our resurrection, the road will be hard. Jesus calls us to our own *Mission: Difficult*—very, very difficult, as in the TV show or movie. Jesus, the one who did the truly impossible job of the cross for our salvation, calls upon us to pick up our cross daily and follow him. Each of your crosses that you pick up is unique to your own life and vocations.

Jesus wants to alter the simplistic thinking of his disciples in this regard—especially in regard to prosperity being the sign that we are among God’s blessed people. Quite the contrary—being a follower of Jesus might entail persecution. And such a persecution will seem to the world and even our own flesh as if God is abandoning us. Contrary to many people health, wealth and prosperity preachers, your best life now might entail the cross.

In today’s Gospel from Mark 10, Jesus explains to the disciples that the benefits are huge—“in the age to come,” Jesus says, “eternal life.” But in the meantime He says, God’s many blessings come “With persecutions.” The difficulties are also great. Jesus implies that we might lose family members over our faith. As he says elsewhere as recorded in Luke 12: “I have come to bring division...a son against his father”. And He specifically warns about persecutions. In this life we will have great blessings, as fellow believers will make up our new family. But we will also have trials and tribulations. And along with these there will be constant temptations, not least of them the desire to look for our security and comfort in wealth.

But remember, no matter how difficult it gets; the Mission: Impossible is Mission: Accomplished because Jesus has completed His mission for us. We are assured of the victory in Christ because he did the Mission: Impossible...

And by the way, the promise of God will *not* self destruct in five seconds.

In Jesus name. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.*