

27th September 2020.

“All things are Possible”

Matthew 19:16-30

‘When life hands you a lemon, make lemonade,’ wrote Norman Vincent Peale, who published his best-known book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, in 1952. It stayed in *The New York Times* bestseller list for 186 consecutive weeks. Much of what he had to say was extremely good and helpful. But, the words of Jesus go way beyond the power of positive thinking.

Norman Vincent Peale said, *‘A positive mental attitude is a belief that things are going to turn out well, and that you can overcome any kind of trouble or difficulty.’* Jesus said, *‘With God all things are possible’* v26. This is far more than the power of positive thinking. It is *the power of God* that makes what seems impossible possible. Nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

Our reading today is taken from one of Jesus’ real-life encounters with a real person asking a real question. The parallel narrative in Mark 10 says the man *ran up and knelt* before Jesus to ask his question: *Teacher, must I do to have eternal life?*

This encounter is found in all three of what’s called the “synoptic gospels,” Matthew, Mark & Luke. Called the synoptic gospels because they each seemed to follow a similar pattern of Jesus’ life and ministry, and contained much the same material, though each wrote with a different style and to a different audience.

Matthew tells us in v22 that this was a young man. Luke records that he was a ruler of some sort, over some territory or lands. Each of them noted that he was rich. So, by the world’s standards, this man “had it all.” He was rich, young and a ruler – with status, influence & power.

So, in a nutshell, here was a rich young man: upright, and a model citizen. He was a successful person in his community. He was not, however, a man of this world. He was not that type of person who used all kinds of strategies and tactics to win his popularity and secure his success in this world.

He was a religious man. He had kept all the commandments: *“You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honour your father and mother; also, you shall love your neighbours as yourself.”* However, he was not a religious fanatic, or a dogmatic freak. He was an earnest seeker.

He was not arrogant. He kept asking, “What do I still lack?” *“What must I do to have eternal life?”* He always felt that he was not perfect. He felt that he needed to do something to have eternal life. **What was wrong with him?**

He had done everything that he could and should do. That was the point. We cannot have eternal life by doing good things. When he focused on doing good deeds, he could not satisfy his spiritual thirst and hunger. The more good deeds he did, the greater his dissatisfaction became.

It seems that his possessions owned him rather than he owned his possessions. To perfect his good deeds, Jesus said, he had to sell all he had and give the money to the poor, then *“come follow me”*, but he could not do it. v22 He went away sad, because he had great wealth. That was his dilemma!

v26 *“with God all things are possible”*

Do you sometimes find yourself facing a seemingly impossible situation? It might be a relationship that seems to have broken down irretrievably, or an issue to do with health, finances or something else where change seems impossible. With God there is always hope, no matter how bad things look. Nothing is impossible with God. His power makes all things possible.

The context of Jesus' words that *‘with God all things are possible’* (v.26) is the account of this rich young man to whom Jesus calls, *‘Come, follow me’* (v.21b). He tells him, *‘Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor’* (v.21a). But it is too much for him to give up and the young man goes away *‘sad’* (v.22). Jesus points out how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (vv.23–24). Yet, with God *‘all things are possible’* (v.26).

Jesus says that, humanly speaking, it is impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God (v.26). Worldly riches are of no help. In fact, they are more of a hindrance. Jesus says, *‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God’* (v.24).

Some people have suggested that this is a reference to a gate in Jerusalem that was called *‘the needle’s eye’*. A camel would need to unload all it was carrying on its back to go through it. Any attempt to rationalise the words of Jesus miss the point. The point is that it is totally unthinkable for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But, what is impossible in human terms is possible with God (v.26).

In answer to the disciples' question, *“Then who has any chance at all?”* Jesus looked hard at them and said, *“No chance at all if you think you can pull it off yourself. Every chance in the world if you trust God to do it”* v25–26, MSG.

Now, Matthew tells us that the disciples were astonished at this, probably because, as French wrote, they lived *“in a culture where wealth was regarded as a sign of God’s blessing.”* *“Then who can be saved?”* Good question – if those we see as having it all together, or having it all, can’t be saved, then what chance do the rest of us have?

Jesus said, *“with man this is impossible...”* We need to understand that – not only is it impossible for a rich person to be saved by their riches or good deeds, but it’s impossible for anyone to be saved by what they do, or who they are, or what they have. **“But”** – thank God for that three-letter word.

“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom.6:23). **“But** with God all things are possible.” *“God can make a way where there seems to be no way.”* Man can’t, you and I can’t, but God can!

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits upon the throne, & unto the Lamb!” That chorus we often sing comes from Rev.7:10, and is a declaration of the great multitude from every nation, and tribe, and peoples, and languages. Our God is to be praised because He is mighty to save! He has set forth His eternal plan of redemption and worked it out thru Christ, who took on our likeness, lived perfectly righteous, and died in our place on the cross.

The risen Lord, our great High Priest, is able to *“save to the uttermost those who draw near to God thru Him...”* (Heb.7:25). Salvation is impossible for us to attain, but not for God. So, depending on anything else but the atoning work of Christ and the mercy/grace of God is foolish.

In this world the rich, the powerful and the famous are the ones who people look up to as 'first'. The poor are looked down on, ignored and seen as 'last'. But in the kingdom of heaven the reverse is the case. Jesus says, '*But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first*' (v.30).

This is God's powerful upside-down kingdom. Jesus asks the rich young man to give to the poor because he wants the man to place his trust in him *and* because the poor are such a high priority in the kingdom. They should be for us too: the thousands of children dying each day through desperate poverty and starvation, the oppressed people of so many countries, the homeless on our streets, the voiceless and the vulnerable.

Jesus rarely told people to give away everything, but in this case he did. For everyone there is a 'cost' to following Jesus. There is the cost of being willing to fly his flag in a hostile world. There is what may seem to be a cost of giving up things that we know to be wrong.

Whatever 'the cost', it is nothing compared to what it cost Jesus to make 'eternal life' v29 possible for you and me. And it is nothing compared to the cost of *not* following Jesus. The rich young ruler missed out on so much.

Furthermore, it is nothing compared to what you receive: '*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life*' v29. Jesus promises that for everything you give up, you will receive far more – in this life and, even more significantly, into eternity with Jesus.

Make this your prayer: Lord, help me to be willing to give everything I have for the sake of the kingdom of God. Thank you that the greatest and most enduring riches come from following Jesus.

In your life, nothing is impossible with God: Job 8:1-10:22

Most of us are familiar with the story Job. It would be good to refresh your memory by reading the above section before you continue.

Sometimes when we see the suffering of others it is tempting to come up with glib explanations. In the advice of Job's friend, Bildad, we see an extraordinary mixture of truth, half-truth and falsehood v1–22.

When Job replies, he says, '*Indeed, I know that this is true. **But...***' 9:2. In other words, he points out that some of what Bildad said was *true*, *but* not all. He rejects his glib explanation of why he is suffering.

Job's words are far more authentic. They come from the heart. He cries out to God, '*I could only plead with my Judge for mercy*' v15. He wishes he had never been born 10:18–19. He admits his struggles and doubts, and even his anger at what is happening to him. He says, '*I loathe my life; therefore, I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul*' 10:1.

Yet in the midst of all this he recognises that nothing is impossible with God. Job says, '*God's wisdom is so deep, God's power so immense... He moves mountains before they know what's happened, flips them on their heads on a whim... We'll never comprehend all the great things he does; his miracle-surprises can't be counted*' 9:4–5,10, MSG. '*You gave me life itself, and incredible love. You watched and guarded every breath I took*' 10:12, MSG.

There is an extraordinary mixture here of honest struggles and faith. Job does not try and pretend that everything is all right, or that he can explain it, yet through it all he clings to what he knows of God.

God was able to do in Job's life what was impossible by human effort. God restored Job's fortunes and *'blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first'* 42:12.

Whatever struggles you and I are facing at the moment, however difficult life looks, however impossible the situation seems, it is important to remember his love for you, and trust that *'with God all things are possible'* (Matthew 19:26).

At times we all are tempted to think we deserve something more or better because of the work we've done for the church, our faithfulness in prayer, or the sacrifices we've made.

We try to accrue bonus points on our "good deed credit cards." But Jesus reiterates that our relationship with God is always on the basis of what He has done for us, not anything we have done for Him.

We have no right to compare ourselves with anyone else, because all we have is from God. It's all by grace, from beginning to end. Amen, and the people said.....

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the example of Job – his faithfulness and trust in you even during the struggles of life. My life is in your hands and at your disposal. Thank you for your amazing grace and love. Thank you that with you nothing is impossible.