

Series: Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Part II: The Impossible Love of God
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
September 30, 2018

Mission Impossible. There is a new movie in the series that I have yet to see. Anybody seen it? Do you remember how the TV show or movies began? Well, there is always the theme song – but that music doesn't start playing until after they set up the plot. It is usually something “impossible” they have to do – like breaking into a vault no one can enter, or kidnapping someone while making that person think that it is two years later – something that seems impossible. When I watch those shows I am always asking myself, “How are they going to do that?” I try to imagine what scheme they will plan and whether they will pull it off. But, somehow in the end, the mission *impossible* is made *possible*.

Today's story from the Bible has an “impossible” component to it. Jesus sums it up by saying this: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” “Which ones?” he inquired. Jesus replied, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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.” When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:16-26, NIV)

This is often called “The story of the rich, young ruler.” It is found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew tells us that he is young, while Luke reminds us that he is a ruler and he is rich. In other words, this person represents perhaps what would be the ideal in our world today: someone who is young, rich, and powerful. He is the kind of person who seems to have it all at a very young age.

He has it all, and yet he seems to be sincere when he comes to Jesus asking a “meaning of life” question: “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16, NIV) Jesus responds by reminding him of the commandments, particularly those that have to do with how we relate to others such as our neighbors. The Jewish perspective of the day was that you attained eternal life by keeping all of the Jewish moral law. The man quickly responds that he has done these things

— he can check those off of his list. But, Jesus appears to intuit something about this rich, young, powerful man that still needs to be addressed. When Jesus is asked if there is anything the young man is still lacking, Jesus says this: ““If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21, NIV) In response, the rich, young ruler becomes very sad because he was very rich. According to Matthew and Mark, he simply goes away without doing anything.

Now when we hear this story, we probably think in terms of our cultural context, but remember that Jesus is speaking to a Roman Palestinian culture that viewed wealth differently. In recent years, at least before the markets crashed, our view of wealth was that there were no limits. Given the right circumstances, anyone could get rich. Obviously not all of us do, but it can be done. You can create something like YouTube, sell your company to Google for \$1.6 billion, and be rich before you are thirty! It is possible because we believed, at least before the market crashed, that wealth was unlimited.

But, in first century Roman Palestinian culture, wealth was seen as limited. The sky was not the limit. In our world, we often accumulate wealth by one of two ways: hard work and luck – such as inheriting family money. But, in that first century culture, it was thought that you received wealth either as a sign of God’s favor, or because you took advantage of the poor and the weak. Today, we sometimes believe that folks are poor because they fail to work hard, or maybe they simply have bad luck. In that day, you believed you were poor because you were out of favor with God -- or because someone had taken advantage of you.

Now there are many places in scripture where Jesus seems to speak against the idea that things like wealth or health are always signs of God’s favor. But, there is at least the possibility that the rich, young man had gained his wealth through taking advantage of the poor and the weak. Maybe he used his ruling power as a public official unethically to get his money. Perhaps that is why, when he asks Jesus if he still lacks doing anything, Jesus tells this wealthy young ruler to give away all he has to the poor – whom he may have abused in the first place to gain his wealth. In other words, his salvation, his finding eternal life, begins with an act of repentance – giving back what he has wrongly taken in the first place. It is an act of restorative justice that could lead him to discover the real meaning of life -- and even the salvation of his soul.

Yet, one also gets the sense that for this rich, young ruler, money was what his life was all about. He was very rich, and when he is given the option to find the way out – the meaning of life – he is sad and chooses to go another way. He was not like Zacchaeus -- the tax collector in another gospel story who encounters Jesus and understands his message. In response, Zacchaeus decides to give away half of all he has in order to pay back four times what he took from others through his tax collecting. Zacchaeus “gets it” and Jesus declared that day that salvation had come to Zacchaeus’ household – but not to this rich, young ruler. For him, it seems like the most important thing in his life is holding on to his money -- and maybe, if he can add God to that mix, then okay. But, if putting God first and trusting in God means getting rid of anything that is a barrier to his relationship with God, then that is simply too much to ask.

Jesus notes that it is really hard for those with great wealth to enter God's kingdom. Jesus compares it to a camel going through the eye of a needle, which was literally impossible. Those

listening get the point when they say something like, “Well if the rich, young, powerful guy can’t get in, then what hope do we have? That is impossible!” But, Jesus reminds them that while it is impossible for humans, God can make this “mission impossible” possible through God’s love and grace.

So, what does this mean for us today? Our first line of defense may be to say, “But, I am not rich! Bill Gates, now he’s rich, but not me.” Yet, compared to the rest of the world, most of us would still probably fall into the category of “rich.” Maybe for us the question is whether we are willing to make choices in life, particularly as they relate to our money, that reflect what we value most in life – especially whether we really trust in God.

Not long ago, I was talking with a musician. He makes his living playing and recording music. He has done it for a number of years. I am always impressed with anyone who can do that. Making a living as a working musician is not easy. At one point in my life when I was younger, I thought about doing that, but I had enough of a taste of playing concerts and traveling to realize that I probably could not make a living as a musician. But, this guy has made it.

I asked him once how he was doing and how his music was working out. He said this to me: “My goal this past year has been to cut my income in half.” Now, I have to say that I have never heard anyone say that to me – ever! Have you ever heard anyone say that before – “My goal is to cut my income in half this year?” What kind of goal is that? So, I asked him what he meant by that and he told me. He said that he had asked his booking agent to book him in fewer places and to try to cut his income in half because he wanted to spend more time working in the town where he lived. He was involved in some projects there and he wanted to have more time to invest in doing those things in his community – his neighborhood. Now I understood. I didn't mention that this artist is a Christian, but now I see that he was aligning his financial goals with what he valued in life. Simply making all the money he could was not that important in his life, so he wanted to cut back. How many of us need to think about a goal like that in our lives?

For some of us, maybe it is a choice between trying to live to get more and more stuff or letting go of the stuff in order to trust God and put God first in our lives. Like the rich young ruler, some of us may be at the point in life where it is really that serious. If we don’t make some choices with how we are living our lives here and now, this may be it. However, it may be “impossible” to hold on to something and to save our souls. But with God, saving our souls is possible through God’s grace, rather than through our own efforts to find meaning in “getting all we can.”

Sometimes when pastors preach or teach this particular passage, we try to water it down, probably because we who have some wealth want to know if we are really supposed to give all we have away to the poor. It can’t really mean that -- can it?

A while back I heard the former Dean of the Duke Chapel, William H. Willimon, at a preaching conference talk about preaching on this same passage. He was using it as an illustration for how it is sometimes effective in preaching simply to let the Bible story speak for itself, and then just end the sermon. He told of doing this when he was preaching in the Duke Chapel when he was on the faculty there. After the sermon, he went to the lunchroom when the chair of his department came up to him and said something like, “We couldn’t really figure out how to end

the sermon today, could we? Well you can always try again next time.” It was said to make a point.

Willimon then went to sit down at the table to eat his lunch, when a student came up and said he would like to ask him about his sermon on the rich young ruler. The preacher already had his back up and said, “Look kid, I have had to put up with garbage from the chair of the department, but I don’t have to take it from you, so watch out!” But, the student said, “I just wanted to ask about Jesus saying we should give away all we have. All I really own now is a bicycle. Does that mean I need to give that away, too?” Willimon paused and then pointed to the chair of the department sitting across the lunchroom saying, “You see that old guy over there. Can you go talk to him about that?” What was such a shock was that this student was actually struggling with what Jesus said.

Last week we talked about Mr. Rogers, who was also an ordained Presbyterian minister. When it comes to someone who has wealth and influence or power in our day and time and has chosen to give away a lot of it to help others, especially the poor -- I think of Tom Cousins. Tom has built many of the largest buildings in downtown Atlanta. He is also a Presbyterian and has been a faithful member of North Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Once Tom went on a trip to Israel to learn more about his Christian faith firsthand. The experience was life-changing. Tom also has a passion for renewing the church, so he decided it would be great if preachers could go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land as he did, so that it might enliven their preaching and renew the church. His goal was to find a way to send every preacher in the country on such a trip. Both of my trips to the Holy Land have been substantially underwritten by the Cousins Foundation.

Tom also has a passion to help the poor. At one point he went to the city of Atlanta and asked what was the worst neighborhood in the city where they needed help. At the time it was East Lake. Today the place has been transformed by projects initiated and funded by the Cousins Foundation. We just saw Tiger Woods win last week at the now picturesque East Lake Country Club, but when Cousins started working in the neighborhood, the country club was not doing well. You sometimes heard gunfire if you ever chose to play a round of golf there.

Tom had the vision for creating places to live where those who were poor lived next door to those who were not poor. He believed the poor needed neighbors who could help them learn to live better lives. Someone who worked for Tom once told me that Tom would never tell you this, but he had given more than \$50 million dollars of his own money to make this work. I want to show you a brief video that gives you a glimpse how one rich and influential person chose to give away a significant amount of what he had to help the poor create a neighborhood. (<https://www.eastlakefoundation.org/who-we-are/overview/>)

You may remember a Mercedes TV commercial from a few years ago that showed a Mercedes crashing into a concrete wall during a safety test. An engineer in a white lab coat walks over after the crash and kneels down to examine the damage, which is minimal. A reporter then asks the engineer about the Mercedes energy-absorbing car body. After the engineer tells all about the unique design, the reporter asks him why Mercedes doesn’t enforce their patent on the design --

a design evidently copied by several other companies because of its success. The engineer then replied matter-of-factly, “Because some things in life are too important not to share.” (From a sermon by Steve Jackson, “Come and See”)

Friends, God’s love was too important not to share with each of us. And what we have been given is also too important not to share with our neighbors who are poor. And doing that is what the impossible love of God looks like!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.