

DIFFICULT, IMPOSSIBLE, POSSIBLE

Mark 10:23-31

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

October 21, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 23 through 31. It is on page 716 of the pew Bible. This gospel lesson continues the one you heard last week, where a self-righteous and rich young man doesn't find the affirmation he's looking for in Jesus. And in this gospel lesson Jesus comments on what just happened. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 23, we read in Jesus' name.

²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." ²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Money is good. Maybe that seems obvious to you. But we might get the impression from what Jesus teaches here that money is a bad thing. He says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (10:23). When we think about temptations that might cause us to sin or fall into unbelief, money is at least close to the top of the list. So perhaps we might think that if we just get rid of all our money, we'll make it into the kingdom of God, because money is bad. But money itself is not bad. Money is actually good. What Jesus teaches us here is that money is a great *danger*.

Here's the thing: sin does not lie in the thing itself nor in the proper use of a thing. Sin lies in the misuse or abuse of a thing. Money, when used rightly, is a good thing, and it can be used in a righteous way. For example, money enables businesses to pay their employees. And then those employees can pay for things like a house and electricity and food for their children. Money also makes it possible for us to have things like schools and hospitals and police departments and fire stations. These and many other good things are brought to us by our good

friend money. Money is a gift from God that helps us stay warm, fed, safe, educated, and alive. It even allows for entertainment, which is also a good thing. God is not opposed to fun.

So what's the problem? For as good and useful as money can be, it is also prone to misuse and abuse. For one thing, money opens up a world of temptations. Whatever our sinful little hearts desire, money can probably get it for us. But that's not really Jesus' point here. Jesus is concerned about the temptation money itself can be for us. The problem is that money can very easily become our god. And I'm using the word "god" with a lowercase "g."

This text is all about the First Commandment. And the First Commandment is this: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7).

And if you ask one of our confirmation students what this means, they will immediately say, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." That's the answer the Small Catechism teaches us. And, by the way, it shouldn't just be our confirmation students who know this. As soon as our children are able to speak and remember things, the First Commandment should be the first part of the catechism we teach them. By the time they reach confirmation, they should have known this part for ten years already. We should impress it upon their hearts and minds so that they remember it their entire lives. And that means that adults should remember this too. If you don't have the catechism memorized, it's never too late to start. So for all of us, whenever we hear the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," the words, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things," should immediately run through our minds.

This was Martin Luther's explanation of the First Commandment. It's really quite simple. "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." But it's quite profound and packed with meaning. It's clear to see that Luther thought long and hard about just the right way to say it. If you scour the entire Bible, looking for the three top verbs that describe what our attitude toward God should be, you will come up with these three verbs: fear, love, and trust.

In the Large Catechism Luther goes on to explain that to have a god means to fear, love, and trust in that person or thing more than anything else. Whatever we fear, that is our god. Whatever we love, that is our god. And whatever we trust, that is our god.

So we should fear the one true God above all things. To fear him means that we recognize his authority to punish us for our sins, but also that we respect him the way children respect their parents. Children fear the punishment their parents can inflict upon them, but they are not terrorized by their parents, assuming, of course, that their parents are good. This is the way we should fear God. And, of course, we should fear God more than we fear our parents or anything else.

We should also love the one true God above all things. To love him means to serve and obey him above all things. Love, the way Scripture uses the word, does not mean warm and fuzzy feelings. Loving God does not mean you are "in love" with God. It means service, sacrifice, and, especially in the case of God, obedience. To love him is to obey him.

And, finally, we should also trust in the one true God above all things. We should recognize that he is the source of every good thing. He provides everything we need for this body and life, and he provides what is needed to bring us from this life to the next. And this is where we take a break from talking about God in general terms, and start talking about the three distinct persons of the Trinity. We trust in each member of the Trinity according to their special work.

We trust in our heavenly Father, who created and still sustains this world. We trust in his Son, Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for our sins and rose from the dead to open eternal life for all men. And we trust in the Holy Spirit who creates this faith in us and preserves it until our final breath. We trust in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to provide everything we need for this life and the next.

To have God as our God means that we “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” We can still fear, love, and trust in other people or things, just not more than the one true God. You can still fear spiders. Just don’t fear them more than God. You can still love your spouse and parents and children. In fact, you probably should, because this is part of what it is to love God. And you can still trust in your furnace to keep you warm this winter, if, of course, your furnace is trustworthy. You can still fear, love, and trust in other things. Sometimes this is actually good. But “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” because this is what it means to have a god.

So to fear, love, or trust in anyone or anything other than the one true God is to have a false god. The theological word for this is “idolatry.” Sometimes we think of idols as some kind of wooden or stone statue that we worship. But very few people actually do this. Instead, we should think of an idol as any person or thing that we fear, love, or trust in more than the one true God.

And perhaps by now you’ve figured out what this has to do with money. Money is our favorite idol. We have lots of idols. The human heart is an idol factory, but money is our favorite.

Just consider the obsession we have with it in pop culture. There are songs that are basically just the word “money,” repeated over and over. One, in particular, starts with the word “money,” and the next twenty-nine words are also the word “money” (“For the Love of Money,” The O’Jays). It’s literally just the word “money,” repeated thirty times. Even Christian music, which is comically repetitive, doesn’t even do this with the name Jesus. Apparently we don’t love Jesus as much as the world loves money. It’s kind of funny, but it’s also true. Money is our favorite idol. There is nothing we fear, love, or trust in as much as money.

So let’s consider our attitude towards money in terms of fear, love, and trust. You might be thinking to yourself, *I don’t think I’m really afraid of money*. Maybe not. But I bet you fear not having it. That’s the way we fear money. And this fear motivates much of our action. We fear the power money has over us when we don’t have any. Money has the power to make us homeless and hungry if we don’t have any.

And love. Oh, man, do we love money. And, again, I don’t mean that we have warm, fuzzy feelings for money. I mean that we serve it. We will do just about anything for it. We’ll break the law for money. We’ll lie on our tax returns for money. We’ll spend forty hours a week at jobs we don’t even like for money. We’ll even work overtime at those jobs for it. All of this because we love money. Now I know, you have to work to eat. That’s a good reason to go to a job you don’t like. But it becomes idolatry when we love money more than God.

This love captures us at a very early age. And I think this happens pretty much the same way for every kid. You’re at the store with your parents. You see a toy that you want. Eventually you come to the realization that money can get this toy for you. Then you start to notice that money has this power over pretty much everything, including candy. Toys and candy—that’s

pretty much everything when you're a kid. And then as we grow up we just find more expensive forms of toys and candy. And we love money, because money can get us all the toys and candy we want.

And as we grow up we learn to trust in money. When we're kids we trust our parents. When we grow up we learn to trust in money. This is not a good transition. Money becomes a means of both security and satisfaction for us.

We trust in money to secure our futures. And this is related to the fear of not having enough. If we do have enough, we trust in that money to ensure we will never be homeless or hungry. We trust it for our security.

We also trust it to satisfy us. We always feel like we need one more thing. You know how it goes. There's this one thing you want, and you think that having that thing will make you happy. But you know how it is. You get that thing, and the satisfaction quickly wears off, and you're on to the next thing. There's always one more thing. But if you have enough money, that next thing is always within reach whenever you want it. So we trust in money to satisfy our desires.

Now the problem isn't really with the various things we acquire. And the problem isn't even with money. The problem is with our desires. We think that the good life consists in satisfying our desires. So our favorite god is really ourselves, and our second favorite god is money, because we can use money to satisfy our desires. But life is not about satisfying our desires. Life is about receiving salvation and living in service to our neighbors.

And this leads us to the fundamental problem with money or any other idols we may have. When we study the First Commandment in confirmation class, I always ask the students, "What is the real problem with having other gods?" And they usually answer with the obvious: "God forbids it." Okay, that's true. But why? Why does God forbid us from having other gods? ... It's because false gods are incapable of saving us.

You can trust in money if you want. And it might give you a little more comfort and security in this life, but you will never be satisfied, and you're still going to die. No amount of money is going to change that. It is never going to satisfy you, and at the end of your unsatisfied life, you're going to die, just like everyone else. This is what we learned in the Old Testament lesson from Ecclesiastes (5:10-20).

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, the son of David (Eccl. 1:1). Now Solomon, at least at that time, was the richest man in the world. And if we account for inflation over the last three thousand years, he might be the richest man who ever lived. So Solomon wrote from personal experience when he said that "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money" (Eccl. 5:10). He'd been there, and he'd done all that and then some. It was pointless. Because even if you make it through life without losing your wealth, which is not a given, you're still going to die. And on that day it won't matter if you're wearing fine silk and gold rings on a comfortable bed in a beautiful palace or if you die buck naked in a ditch. If life is a race between the rich and the poor, then it always ends in a tie: dead. This is even worse than a tie in hockey. You get zero points.

So what does the rich and wise King Solomon say about money? Whatever you've got, enjoy it for the few days of your life, because whatever you have is a gift from God (Eccl. 5:18-19). Enjoy it, but do not trust in it, because it cannot save you.

Money is a good thing, and like all good things, it is a gift from God. But our hearts are so wicked that they take this good gift and turn it into an idol. And this idol pulls our fear, love, and trust away from the one true God. This temptation is especially strong for the wealthy.

If you were here last week you heard about a rich young man who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. The man was very self-righteous, so Jesus decided to break his self-righteousness. He told him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. The man couldn't bring himself to do this because he was very wealthy. He learned from Jesus that he was not as righteous as he thought.

And after the man leaves, Jesus says to his disciples, **"How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God"** (10:23). The disciples were amazed. This didn't make sense to them. But instead of Jesus softening the statement, he doubles down on it and says, **"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"** (10:25). This really shocked the disciples, because they had a prosperity gospel in those days, kind of like the one we have today. It's the idea that the rich are more righteous than the poor, because God rewards those who do good with wealth. It's not true, but the disciples believed this false doctrine, so Jesus' statement really shocked them. If it's difficult for rich people—the people who are blessed by God—if it's difficult for them to enter the kingdom of God, then what chance do the rest of us have? Their exact words were, **"Then who can be saved?"** (10:26).

And Jesus confirms their worst fears. Entering the kingdom of God is not just difficult. **"With man it is impossible."** Amen.

Wait! No! That's not the end. That would be a terrible place to stop. That's not the end of the story. Man is never the end of the story. Jesus goes on, **"But not with God. For all things are possible with God"** (10:27). And this is really the point of having a god, and not just any god, but the one true God. It means to have a Savior. The problem with having a false god is that false gods can't save you. And the blessing of having the one true God is that he can save you. To have the one true God means to have a Savior.

This means that entering the kingdom of God is more than just a possibility. When Jesus says, **"All things are possible with God,"** he doesn't mean, "Maybe you will enter the kingdom; maybe you won't; but at least there's a chance." That's not what "possible" means with Christ. "Possible" means that Christ can and *will* do it. We trust in him to carry us into the kingdom of God, because, with us, this is impossible, but not with him. We trust in the God who can bring us into his kingdom, and he does.

To have the one true God means that death is not the end, because your God, Jesus, has been there. He has carried our sins into death. He has carried our idolatry into death. It was laid upon him at the cross, and it was buried with him. Jesus has removed this sin from us and risen triumphantly over death. He has made this horrible and fatal tie, in which all people are losers, to be a mere sleep. He has made the grave a holy resting place for those who sleep in Christ.

It still doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor. Whether you die in fancy clothes or buck naked, by faith you are clothed with Christ's righteousness, and you will wear his robes in the resurrection of the dead. This righteousness and salvation is his gift to you now, and this is the kind of wealth that will endure to eternal life. This is a good place to say, "Amen."

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.