

## Making the Impossible Possible

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for this Loyalty Sunday is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus said, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.”** Here ends our text.

There’s a teaching that has become quite popular in America today, from Rev. Joel Osteen and others, which is known as the prosperity gospel. The premise is that, if you earn God’s favor, he will bless you with wealth and health. If you pray hard enough, live good enough, maybe even tithe enough to your favorite TV evangelist, then God will bless your business, your career, your investments, and you will be rich. Sort of like the prayer of Jabez, who asked God to bless him and enlarge his territory. And God granted his request supposedly because he was more honorable than his brothers. But if you follow this bad theology to its conclusion then those who are wealthy must have God’s favor and those who are poor must have his displeasure.

Of course, there’s nothing new under the sun. This is the same thinking as the three friends of Job some 4000 years ago. Job had had great wealth, land, and herds, and servants. He must have had God’s favor because of his righteous living. But when Job lost it all, his friends told him it was a sign of God’s displeasure. Job needed to repent of some particular sin, get his life in order, and God would bless him again. The wealthy had God’s favor; the poor had his displeasure.

This same thinking prevailed in the time of Jesus. The wealthy must be first on God’s list because he had blessed them, and the poor must be last because he hadn’t. Imagine the shock and amazement of the disciples when Jesus told them, **“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.”** Instead of being a sign of God’s favor, Jesus actually calls wealth a hindrance to entering God’s kingdom.

Now why is this? Does wealth keep you from passing through the gates of heaven like too much change in your pockets keep you from passing through airport security? Are money and riches inherently bad? No, but it’s the love of money that’s the root of all kinds of evil. A person may be wealthy for many other reasons than that God has blessed him. He may have acquired wealth by cheating his customers, lying on his tax return, or withholding proper wages. He may be wealthy because he’s spent a life of hoarding, never giving to those in need. To enter God’s kingdom first requires repentance of sin. And a dishonest miser finds this too difficult. He’d rather continue his ways and keep the money.

Or a person may have wealth simply because he’s very honest and hardworking. He works long hours. He makes great sacrifices to store up wealth. Or he may have inherited it. But now that he has it, he’s become very dependent on it. He loves the things he can buy with it. The prestige it gives him. The security he has for the future. If any calamity strikes, he always has his wealth to protect him. The problem is, like the rich man in last week’s Gospel reading, he loves his wealth more than God. He trusts in it above God and fears losing it more than he fears God. In fact, as long as he has his wealth, he thinks he doesn’t need God.

And so when the cry comes, “Repent of your sin and trust in God,” the wealthy man is greatly tempted to do neither. It’s too difficult for him. Jesus even adds, “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.” It’s easier for the largest animal the Jews knew to pass through the smallest opening they could imagine, than for a rich man to enter God’s kingdom.

Now the disciples were exceedingly astonished when Jesus said this. Not only did he say it was difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, but unless Jesus can change the laws of physics with camels and needles, he’s saying it’s downright impossible. So they say to Jesus, “Who then can be saved?” And we might ask the same question. For any one of us, rich or poor, has at one time or another fallen into the same trap baited by money. Padding the cost, being a little creative on the resume’ to get a better paying job, withholding that tip. Putting our hope of security in stock markets and insurance policies, pensions and government programs. “As long as I have these things to turn to, I’ll be okay.” We’ve all had those times when we’ve loved and trusted in money more than God. Who of us then can be saved? It seems impossible.

But Jesus said, **“With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”** For God can change the laws of physics. Make seas part, walk on water, multiply loaves. Even put camels through needles if he wants to. Put something very large into something very small. When the virgin

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Mary asked the angel, "How can God be a baby in my womb?" Gabriel replied, "Nothing is impossible with God." Even putting a very large God into the very small womb of a teenage girl. Even God becoming man for the salvation of the world, for the salvation of the very poor and the very rich.

Yes, all things are possible with God. And Jesus knows this. So when Jesus was in great distress in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed, "**Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. If possible, remove this cup of your wrath and suffering from me. Yet, not my will but Thine be done.**" But in this prayer, Jesus found the one thing that wasn't possible for God. It's impossible for God to go against his own will. It was impossible for God the Father to spare his Son from suffering and dying on the cross because it was his will to save you. But in Jesus' passion, God again does the impossible. All the sins of the world are laid on one man, and God pours all his wrath against sin into one man. And Jesus bears it all for us. One lone man swallows a very large thing. He swallows death. God does the impossible.

And God continues to do the impossible. Through his word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, through holy baptism of water and his word, God the Holy Spirit breathes life into dead men. He turns them from their trust in wealth to trust in Jesus Christ. He gives them faith to let loose of mammon and cling to Jesus. Faith like the wealthy man Abraham who said, "Lot, why don't you pick first. Here, Melchizedek, priest of God, here's a tenth of everything. You kings keep the plunder; I need no reward." Faith like Job, who when he lost all his wealth said, "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Faith like the tax collector Zacchaeus who turned from his greed and turned to Jesus and said, "Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." Faith like poor Peter and the disciples who left everything and followed Jesus. Faith like you have. Faith that lets loose of a tithe into the offering plate or your pledge today for next year's giving, but clings to Jesus and his forgiveness in his Word and in His Supper. Through faith in Jesus Christ, God keeps squeezing rich men and poor men through the gates of heaven. God does the impossible.

So it's not the rich who have God's favor and the poor who have his displeasure. Rather it's those who trust in Jesus alone and his righteousness who have God's favor. Even when it doesn't look like it. Even when they're poor and persecuted. Jesus consoles us. He says, "**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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.**" Now who is Jesus talking about who leaves home and family and suffers persecution for his name and the sake of the Gospel? Well, Jesus is addressing the apostles but he's also addressing all those men and women who enter church work today, pastors and teachers and musicians. Because of their faith in Christ, they leave their home and family, pay out private school tuition at our Concordia schools, and then enter a church worker position where they won't have much wealth, probably remain poor, and may be persecuted. But God brings them to a new land and gives them new brothers and sister and fathers and mothers in their new parish home.

And the same is true of you. Because of your faith in Jesus Christ, you've given up time and labor and wealth. Every time you tithe, you're saying, "Money, you don't own me. You're not my god. I trust my Lord to provide for my needs. I may be a little poorer, but that's okay. Through Jesus Christ, I have God's favor." And when you pledge for next year's church budget or give to the Legacy Fund for missions and ministry to our community or maintenance of the Lord's house, your saying, "Well, maybe I won't do those home improvements to make my house better, but I'm going to improve the Lord's house. Help make it a welcoming place of worship for our community. Bring more people, rich and poor, through those doors and into the kingdom of God. And I'll have even more brothers and sisters in the Lord. Besides that, Jesus is preparing an eternal mansion for me in heaven."

Not too many years ago, it seemed impossible that we'd be able to carry out the plans to expand our church facility and ministry here at Trinity Darmstadt. How could that much wealth come to such a small church? With man it was impossible. But God opened the floodgates and through his people provided all our needs. For nothing is impossible with God. He makes the impossible possible. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.