

## **“Impossible Grace”**

Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly live in the joy of believing and trusting in your grace. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.*

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Have you ever felt pressured to make a choice you didn't feel ready to make, to pick between two things, both of which felt worthy or true or good or possibly equally bad? There are those out there who will try to convince us that faith is about choosing this not that, these not those, and deciding which things are good and which things are bad. But what if it's more nuanced than that? Our scriptures today are full of seeming paradoxes, where two things are held in tension, and one impulse might be to assume only one of them can be true. But I have found that much of the time, following Jesus invites us to embrace what some call the “Both/And.” The “Both/And” gives us permission to hold two seemingly opposite truths, in relationship rather than tension, so that we discover that truth is deeper when we lean into the paradoxes rather than settling for binary choices.

The young man who approaches Jesus is both obedient (to the main commandments) and resistant (to the extra credit work Jesus offers him). Humans are portrayed as both not good and beloved. Jesus promises both blessings and persecutions. Grace is both possible and impossible. Jesus is both tested and sinless, our high priest and yet sympathetic. We are to consider ourselves both completely

exposed and bold in seeking mercy in our time of need. None of these things are either/or; they are all both/and. To pretend that faithfulness demands that we pick one side does damage to the depth of the truth Jesus is trying to teach us. When we find ourselves in a situation where someone is pushing us to choose between two things, often our best course of action is to slow down and back up. If we take a moment to zoom out and look at the bigger picture, the broader context, we may be able to see that the question we're being pressed to answer is a false dichotomy, that is a trick question that doesn't have an easy answer. Maybe both options are true, or maybe both sides are partially true, or maybe they're both a mix of good and bad, like most things. Life is not a menu, where you pick the chicken salad or the cheeseburger. It's a buffet, where you can try new things and enjoy old favorites in the same meal.

Are humans good or bad? Yes! Is the kingdom of God hard or easy to enter? Yes! Is Jesus heavenly and sinless or present and sympathetic to our weakness? Yes! Is following Jesus rewarding or difficult? Yes! Do we have to be able to explain all these paradoxes? No! This tension is even present when we're considering how closely we can apply the experiences of those first disciples to our own lives. Their circumstances were different from ours in so many ways, living under an occupying power, very little technology, practically no knowledge of the rest of the world, and on and on. But then we look at how they respond when Jesus reflects on the rich young man's reaction, and something feels very familiar. "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Jesus says. And the next question is "Then who can be saved?"

as if it's obvious that the rich people had the best chance of any of them. You might think that at least among the people following Jesus, who, by his own admission, had nowhere to lay his head, there would be a baseline assumption that the kingdom of heaven was for the poor, and the meek would inherit the earth, as per the Beatitudes. But even here, the prosperity gospel was purveying its falsehoods about wealth signifying virtue. And even those disciples were susceptible to buying into the idea that the rich were the most likely to go to heaven. If that guy's going to have trouble, what chance do the rest of us have, they seem to be asking.

It's like somehow Jesus has a very different idea about what it means to enter into the kingdom of heaven. 'You can't take it with you,' he's warning, or even, 'you simply can't get through the door if you're carrying all that baggage.' But perhaps more importantly, not only can you not take it with you, you won't need it when you get there. It's our reluctance to lay down all the stuff that helps us feel worthy that keeps us from accepting God's promise that we are beloved. Not because of what we have, or what we've made, or what we've done, but because we are. Impossible grace is made possible.

We have such a strong human preoccupation with earning what we get. But Jesus isn't interested in us getting what we deserve; he's telling us about what God is giving us, freely, lovingly, joyfully. The kingdom of heaven isn't about prize winners or power brokers or people pleasers. It's about humbling ourselves to recognize that we're in the presence of God, that Christ Jesus is there in the face of the one who needs our help, that the Holy Spirit is moving when we're being asked to step up and serve our

neighbors and love our enemies. We don't do good to get into heaven; we do good as a response to understanding that we're already living in the kingdom of God. "Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?"

Those moments when we feel laid bare, soul sliced from spirit, with the thoughts and intentions of our hearts open to judgment are inextricably connected to the moments when we're approaching the throne of grace with boldness. It is through the bracing truth of the Holy Spirit's unflinching gaze that we find the courage to accept the mercy of God. Are we good? Are we bad? Yes. But more importantly, God is good, and we are beloved. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Let us not give into the temptation to defend ourselves, for it is God who will deliver us from evil. Impossible grace is made possible.

We can reject the false binaries of the world because we know that God's truth is broader than our simplistic categories. We can cast off the prosperity gospel that tries to convince us wealth is a sign of God's blessing, because we know that God loves the poor and the meek and the humble. We can get off the hamster wheel of trying to earn our way into heaven and find rest in following Jesus only as best we can, because it is God's grace that saves us, not our own righteousness. Impossible grace is made possible. Hallelujah and Amen!