

Sermon Outline

IS THE MISSION JUST DIFFICULT, OR IS IT IMPOSSIBLE?

- I. How difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!
- II. The truth is, it's *impossible* for *anyone* to be saved on his or her own.
- III. But God has done the impossible—leaving us “only”
Mission: Difficult.

Sermon

Many of you remember the old TV program *Mission: Impossible*, and some of you have become acquainted with it through the more recent movie versions starring Tom Cruise. Basically, the television program revolved around an agent, originally by the name of Dan Briggs and later replaced by Jim Phelps, receiving dangerous government assignments. The tagline was a tape recording at the beginning of each show that said, “Your mission, Mr. Briggs (Mr. Phelps), should you decide to accept it, is . . .” And then after relaying the message, the tape would self-destruct “in five seconds.” The name of the show came, I suppose, because these assignments appeared impossible. They certainly were difficult. However, by the end of every show, Agent Briggs or Phelps and his team of agents had triumphed, had done the “impossible.” I suppose *Mission: Very Difficult* just doesn't have the same zing.

In our Gospel today, Jesus talks about entering the kingdom of heaven and life as one in that kingdom. In one case, he describes it as very difficult, like the *Mission: Impossible* assignments—not really impossible but really, really difficult. In another, he describes it as truly impossible. So which one is it?

IS THE MISSION JUST DIFFICULT, OR IS IT IMPOSSIBLE?

I.

Remember from last Sunday what happened immediately before today's text? A rich young man came to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. The man calls Jesus good. Jesus responds with asking why the man called Him good, asking if the man understands the true implications of his address. It's as if Jesus is saying, "How far are you willing to take this? Do you know who I really am? Are you willing to *confess* who I really am? With not just your lips but with your *actions*? Are you willing to believe in the impossible? Are you willing to accept just how difficult this mission is?"

Jesus points the man to the commandments for his mission. The list of commandments Jesus gives isn't exhaustive, nor need it be. It makes the point. One must keep the commandments perfectly. Jesus' "assignment" forces the young man to acknowledge whether or not he can say with the Psalmist, "In the way of your testimonies I delight *as much as* in all riches" (Ps 119:14, emphasis added). The man leaves saddened because he had many possessions. Did he go away to do what Jesus said, his sadness merely indicating that he realizes now just how difficult genuine discipleship is? Or does his downcast demeanor indicate a refusal on his part to pursue the path Jesus has laid out? Whatever the case, Jesus turns to his disciples and comments how difficult it is for the rich to enter heaven: "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (v 23). Difficult. Very difficult.

This surprises the disciples. Perhaps they assume that wealth is a sign of God's blessing and therefore an indicator

of one's relationship with God. This is an assumption that we make even today. Those who have the most money, or the most possessions, are those most blessed by God. If you do not have those things, then you must not be blessed. Yet, even these blessings can be misused. Money is a good gift from God, but "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils" (1 Tim 6:10). The text as it stands warns us today about the danger of allowing riches to get in the way of our total devotion to God. Riches, rather than always being a sign of God's favor, can actually get in the way of one's trust in God. We can, and often do, make money or possessions our gods and place our trust in them.

II.

But it gets worse—or at least it appears to. Jesus goes on to teach his disciples a deeper truth.

"Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.' And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man it is impossible'" (vv 24b–27a). Humanly speaking, no one can slip a camel through the eye of a needle. Not only are riches a huge hindrance to entering the kingdom and thus merely difficult, but Jesus also says it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And not just the rich! "Then who can be saved?" Jesus answers: it's impossible for *anyone* to enter the kingdom of heaven on one's own.

It's not just riches that can get in the way of heaven. Indeed, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17). But any of God's greatest gifts can and

often are used by Satan as his greatest temptations and most powerful idols. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me” (Mt 10:37) shows that parents, children, and spouses can become idols. How many people forego church because of their family members? How many leave a church where God’s Word is properly taught to join a church that errs in some doctrine because they want their kids to have a “better” youth group?

The truth is that no one can save himself. It does not matter how much wealth you have, how many possessions you have, how many people you follow or friend on FaceBook. None of them can save you. It is impossible. And unlike “difficulties,” there are not grades of “impossibility.” With man, it is simply impossible. With any man, all men, anyone, anywhere. There are no exceptions. No matter what race, no matter how smart, no matter what age, no matter what gender, no matter how rich, no matter how poor. Man cannot and does not do it, not even with a little help from God. It isn’t that man does his part and God does his. Man’s only part in the equation is the impossible. What man brings to the table is the impossible. Man merely brings sin. The only thing men supply is man’s need.

III.

No, man needs the God of the possible to do the impossible. “‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at [the disciples] and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God’” (vv 26b–27). For us, it’s not just difficult; it can’t happen. But with God, nothing shall be impossible.

The Gospel that God does the impossible for you. The Father sends His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus paid the price that

was impossible for you to pay. He paid for your sin, my sin, the sin of the whole world. No mere mortal could do that. God became man so that you and I might be saved. In Jesus, God died for you. He paid the full price for you by suffering, bleeding, and dying on the cross. Whether you are rich or poor, you believe. You are saved. We confess this truth whenever we say with Luther in the Small Catechism, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” Not only your salvation but also your conversion is all God’s doing. God doing the impossible.

Even though God has done the impossible and redeemed us, paying for all of our sins, and even though he has done the impossible and turned our hearts of stone into believing hearts, until we enter fully into the kingdom in the resurrection, the road will be hard. Jesus calls us to our own Mission: Difficult—very, very difficult, as in the TV show. Jesus, the one who did the truly impossible job of the cross for our salvation, calls upon us to pick up our cross daily and follow him.

Being a follower of Jesus might entail persecution. And such persecution will seem to the world and even to our own flesh as if God is abandoning us. Contrary to many popular health, wealth, and prosperity preachers, your best life now might entail the cross. Jesus explains to the disciples that the benefits are huge—“in the age to come,” Jesus says, “eternal life.” But in the meantime, he says, the difficulties are also

great. Jesus implies that we might lose family members over our faith. And he specifically warns about persecutions. In this life we will have great blessings, as fellow believers will make up our new family. But we will also have trials and tribulations. And along with these there will be constant temptations, not least of them the desire to look for our security and comfort in wealth.

But remember, no matter how difficult it gets, the Mission: Impossible is Mission: Accomplished because Jesus has completed his mission for us. We are assured of the victory in Christ because he did the Mission: Impossible through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

(Pause)

And by the way, this promise of God will *not* self-destruct in five seconds. Amen.

May the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.