

Astonishing Love

Mark 10:17-31

This morning we return to our fall series and to the Gospels, where our goal has been to meditate on the heart of Christ by looking at how treated others during his earthly ministry, and how that reveals his love. If we're not careful, it's easy for our relationship with Jesus can get stuck in the theoretical. To have an *informational* relationship with Jesus, to know things *about* him—which is not unimportant; sound doctrine is absolutely essential to knowing Christ. But as we've said several times in this series, Jesus is more than a doctrine. *He's a person*. A person whose heart is filled with love for us. And one of the best ways to see his heart of love is by looking carefully at how he treated others. To 'see how he loved them,' and so understand more deeply, and reflect more fully how he loves us.

That brings us this morning to the Gospel of Mark, ch. 10, where we're going to consider the astonishing love of Christ. As we've seen in these stories, Jesus often surprises, even shocks us with his actions. And yet it's those surprises that often reveal most clearly his love. And there are several astonishing turns in this story.

A Sincere Question and an Astonishing Reply

At this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for what will be his final week on earth (cf. 10:1, 17, 32-33, 46, 11:1). He's going there to celebrate Passover, where he knows he's about to be arrested, falsely accused, tortured, and crucified, and then to be raised on the third day (8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). He's on his way to complete his redemptive work, to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45).

And along the way he's approached by someone whom Mark simply identifies as "a man," though Luke tells us he is a ruler (Lk. 18:18) and Matthew tells us that he was young (Mt. 19:22)—and so this story is typically known as "the rich young ruler." The man asks Jesus what appears to be a very sincere question, as he runs up and kneels before him: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17).

Now I've been in ministry for over 15 years (campus ministry, church context), and in all my years of seeking to make Christ known, never once have I had someone come up to me out of the blue and say, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' How can I be saved? That's like the dream question, right, if you're trying to make Christ known? That's the one we're always waiting for people to ask us so we can tell them about Jesus.

And so you expect here that this is where Jesus is going to break out the Four Spiritual Laws or the Bridge Illustration or some sort of gospel explanation—or even just John 3:16, right? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That's how you inherit eternal life!

But instead we see the first surprising turn in the story, the first astonishment: Jesus' answer feels kind of cold and sounds an awful lot like legalism. Look at what he says in vv. 18-19. First he calls out the way the man addresses him. "And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone'" (v. 18). And what exactly Jesus is saying here is a little confusing. Is he refusing to play the compliment game with the man ('I called you good, now you call me something nice')?¹ Is he just directing the man's attention to the goodness of God (a goodness this man inevitably falls short of despite his record of obedience)?² Is he subtly pointing out his own divine authority ('Only God is good, so don't call me good unless you're ready to recognize me as God')?³ I think it's probably the third one.

And then he points him not to grace, or to faith, but to the Law: "You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother'" (v. 19; cf. Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 24:14).

Jesus' answer is astonishing because it's not what we expect him to say, and because we know that's not how you inherit the kingdom of God. The rest of the New Testament is clear on this: Again, John 3:16: "whoever *believes* shall not perish but have everlasting life." Galatians 2:16: "we know that a person is *not* justified by works of the law but through *faith* in Jesus Christ." Ephesians 2:8: "For *by grace* you have been saved through *faith*." Even the Old Testament makes that clear—Genesis 15:6: Abraham "*believed* the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

But what we need to remember here is that Jesus is answering *this man's* question, not ours. He's not speaking generally on the subject, but replying to a specific person. And remember what we've seen so far about his love. His omniscient love—he knows things about people that no one else can see, and therefore knows exactly what we need (cf. Mk. 2:1-12). Or his disruptive love—how sometimes he does something surprising to help us wake up to see who he really is (cf. Mk. 4:35-41).

And so while it's not the answer we expect, or the one we would give, let's give Jesus the benefit of the doubt for a minute, and see where this thing goes.

We see the man's response in v. 20: "And he said to him, 'Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.'" Now that probably strikes most of us as a bit on the nose, even a bit hypocritical. Who would actually say that? But again, the impression that the narrator gives us is that the man is being sincere. For starters, Jesus doesn't rebuke him as a hypocrite, which is what he typically does when he encounters one. And in terms of keeping the letter of the Old Covenant law, while Jesus focuses on the heart (e.g., Matt. 5:21-45), the Ten Commandments themselves mostly talk about our behavior. Such that one *could* keep those commandments. Even Paul said of himself prior to his relationship with Christ, that as to "righteousness under the law," he was "blameless" (Phil. 3:6).⁴

¹ So Joel B. Green, commenting on the parallel passage in Luke 18, in *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 654-655.

² James Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 310-311.

³ Hans F. Bayer, study notes on Mark in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 1915.

⁴ See Edwards, 310-311.

So the man seems sincere and confident in his faithfulness to the Law. And Jesus doesn't call him a hypocrite. He does, however, point out the one thing missing from this man, which brings us to the second surprising turn in the story. Verse 21:

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (vv. 21-22).

Here is the second astonishment in the story: Jesus' answer sends the man away. I mean, here's a guy who sincerely wants to follow Jesus and know God, and Jesus' answer is so demanding that he loses the sale. Why would he do that? It says the man was "disheartened" by the saying—shocked, saddened. He didn't see this coming and it sucked the wind out of him to hear it.

And what an impossible standard—to sell everything you have and give it to the poor? Is that something Jesus expects everyone to do in order to receive eternal life? It's truly an astonishing reply. Even his own disciples are amazed at the idea. Look at vv. 23-26. After the man leaves, Jesus looks around at his disciples and says to them twice: "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (v. 23); and 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" (vv. 24-25). What a picture! And this is not in reference to some gate in Jerusalem that a camel could only go through if they kneeled—there is no evidence for a gate like that until the ninth century after Christ.⁵ It's meant to be a ridiculous picture—like sucking an elephant through a straw. It's impossible.

And so notice the disciples' reaction to both statements: they were "amazed at his words" (v. 24); "And they were exceedingly astonished" (v. 26). And that astonishment is expressed in the question everyone is asking—if this is so, "Then who can be saved?" (v. 26).

Why does Jesus treat this rich young man the way he does? It almost feels cold and cruel. Like the way a celebrity musician might treat someone who approaches them on the street to give them a sample of their own music—the smug incredulity, the reality check that says 'you'll never make it in this town.' That's how it feels.

But to conclude that this is how Jesus really is treating the man overlooks a critical detail. Look again at v. 21: "And Jesus, looking at him, *loved him*, and said to him, 'You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'" What Jesus says here, he says not out of cold indifference or unrealistic expectations, but out of love. In fact, this is the only place in Mark's Gospel where the narrator uses the word "love" to describe Jesus' actions. And you can see the affection. Notice how he *looked* at him, and loved him. That's the thing the celebrity on the street won't do to someone who offers a sample of their music—make eye contact. Because what does eye contact communicate? That you're a person, not a problem. That's the reason we avoid eye contact in merging traffic, right? If we make eye contact, we feel obligated to let them in. And so we just pretend like we don't see them when they're obviously there. Or when we pass someone begging

⁵ Edwards, 314.

on the street—if we look at them, we risk loving them, caring about them—and that can be costly. As Paul Miller says, “Love begins with looking.”⁶

Jesus looked at him. He wasn’t trying to dodge or get rid of him; he doesn’t treat him like a problem. He sees him as a person. And looking at him, he loved him. What he says to him, he says out of love.

And so how is this love? Pointing the man to the Law, holding up an impossible standard—how do Jesus’ astonishing words actually love the man? In three ways: they expose his subtle self-righteousness, they expose his true god (which isn’t Christ), and they invite him to find life in Jesus despite all of that.

Astonishing Love Exposes Our Subtle Self-Righteousness

First, Jesus’ words expose the man’s subtle self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is when we measure our identity, our security, our standing before God based on our own moral accomplishments or achievements. We find our *righteousness* in *ourselves*. And we could see that in the man’s first response: “all these I have kept from my youth” (v. 21). You can be sincere, and still be self-righteous. The man’s hope for acceptance before God was based on what he had done for God—his performance.

You can even see it in the question he asks to start the whole conversation: “what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” (10:17). He’s asking the wrong question. What matters is not what we do for God, but what Christ does for us.

Our default is to think that God rewards greatness. That because God is so great, I have to be great for him to be loved by him. I have to be holy, successful, spiritual, influential. But the irony is that it’s those who recognize their smallness, their weakness, to whom the kingdom of God belongs. Not the rich in spirit—the rich in self—but the poor in spirit—the *poor in self*, will inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3).

It’s interesting to compare Jesus’ answer to the rich young man with his response to the little children in the previous scene, Mark 10:13-16. As people are trying to bring children to Jesus, his disciples are rebuking them and trying to stop them, as if they’re too small or insignificant to bother Jesus with. “But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it’” (10:14-15). Consider the irony: these children who have nothing lack nothing; the rich man who has everything still lacks the most important thing.

The reality is, in the economy of Christ, if you want to gain life, you must first lose it. To come to grips with your spiritual poverty and weakness, to come under conviction of sin, and see your need of Christ. To repent from depending on your own righteousness—your own good works for God—and instead cling to Christ’s righteousness for us. To recognize what Jesus says in v. 27, when his disciples ask, ‘who then can be saved?’: “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”

⁶ These insights belong to Paul Miller, *Love Walked Among Us* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001, 2014), 29-32.

Only God is able to save us from our sin—to bring forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal, that we might have eternal life. It's not our greatness that prepares us to know God; it's our smallness. Our need. As Jesus says in v. 31, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

And Jesus loves them man enough to show him that. He loves him too much to let him go on trusting his own self-righteousness. And he loves us enough to show us the same.

Astonishing Love Exposes our True God

The second way Jesus loves the man is seen in how his words expose the man's true God—namely, money not Jesus. When Jesus asks the man to sell everything he has and give to the poor, he's not laying down a universal standard for how to follow Jesus or inherit eternal life. We know this because he doesn't say that to everyone, and the New Testament certainly doesn't reiterate that as a universal principle or condition. Remember, Jesus is answering *this man's* question. And for this man, inheriting eternal life will require divesting of earthly treasure, because Jesus knows the grip it has on him.

One author writes:

I have heard it said that if you want to catch a monkey . . . you need a jar which the monkey can just get his paw into when his fingers are open. Then you put something into the jar which the monkey wants—some fruit, say. Then you put the jar temptingly where the monkey is likely to find it. The monkey will reach his hand into the jar to get the fruit. He will close his fist around it. But of course, when he closes his fist, especially if he's going something inside it, he can't get it out of the jar. He won't want to let the fruit go, but unless he does he won't be able to get his hand out.⁷

In this man's case, his hand is wrapped around his money. His stuff. "He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (v. 22). And because he is unwilling to open his hand and let it go, he has actually imprisoned himself. Now, were his hand wrapped around something else—family, for instance, or a house, or a certain career, Jesus' answer to him might have been different (cf. Lk. 9:57-62). But for this man, it was money.

And the idea here gets at what we spent the last three weeks talking about in our short series on giving—where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. How we spend our money reveals the true master of our hearts. As Jesus said in Matthew 6, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24).

Nor can you serve God and anything else at the same time. While Jesus doesn't call everyone who follows him to sell all their possessions and give to the poor, he does call everyone to lay down their lives and die to themselves. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). You can't follow a crucified Savior without being crucified. The call to say no to sin, no to our selves, no to this world, even no to some of the good things in this world, so we can say yes to Jesus—that call applies to all of us. And it's

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 48.

challenging but healthy to ask ourselves, if we were the one on the road asking that question to Jesus, what would he likely ask us to give up? What in my life competes the most with my allegiance to him? With my trust in him? What am I unwilling to let go of in the jar? My grades? My career? My family? My ambition? My romantic interests? My sexuality? My stuff? Can I trust God when he tells me that Jesus is better?

And it's not as though whatever he asks us to give up won't in some way be rewarded. Peter is trying to figure that out when he says in v. 28: "See, we have left everything and followed you." And Jesus assures him,

"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." (10:29-30)

Even when we say no to good things in this world for the sake of Jesus—to houses, to family, to friends—God in his grace actually multiplies what we give up. Because he places us in the family of Christ, where we're all brothers and sisters. And when you're part of a family, my house is your house, right? My car is your car. That's how families operate. That's true of life in Christ here, and it will be even truer in the new creation to come. As one author summarizes, "The sacrifices [we] make in leaving 'homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields' to follow Jesus (v. 29) are nothing compared to the returns [we] will receive in the community of faith now and in heaven in the life to come."⁸

Now included in that provision is persecutions. Don't miss that part! As we share life together in Christ, so also we share in suffering for Christ until he returns. Which reminds us again that the point of Christ's assurances here is not to tighten our grip on this world, but to loosen it. "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (v. 31). Jesus loves us too much to see us with our hand caught in the jar, and not invite us to let go. To let go and follow him and find in him a treasure to which nothing in this world can compare.

Jesus, in his love, exposes the man's self-righteousness. But finally, and perhaps most astonishing of all, Jesus' words invite the man, despite his self-righteousness and idolatry, to find the eternal life he's looking for by letting go of all that and following him.

Astonishing Love Invites Sinners to Find Eternal Life

It should never cease to amaze us that God's response to sinners—to self-righteous, idolatrous people like me and you and the man in this story—is to offer forgiveness and new life. When he looks at the man, he doesn't pronounce judgment, or tell him, 'It's too late, you had your chance.' He looks at him and loves him. He invites him to forsake his own righteousness and his great wealth and find out what it truly means to live.

Jesus responds with grace. He offers him life and forgiveness not on the basis of the man's greatness or failures, but on the basis of his own love, which he will perfect on the cross, where God does for us what is impossible to do for ourselves. His life of perfect righteousness before

⁸ Edwards, 316-317.

the Father—a righteousness inside and out—Christ takes his right standing and credits it to our account, while at the same time taking the penalty and punishment for our sinful disobedience, and paying it in full. That’s grace—salvation based not on what we do for God, but on what Christ has done for us.

The love of Christ is astonishing, not just because it calls us to forsake what the world treasures, but because it meets us in our weakness and sin and offers us eternal life. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). This is truly amazing, astonishing love.

But sadly, not everyone sees it that way. The man in our story rejects Jesus’ offer. He counts worldly treasure as greater than eternal treasure in Christ. It’s one of the saddest stories in Mark’s Gospel—for someone to be so close, but unwilling to let go.

So how will *we* respond? What will we do with Christ’s astonishing love? And how do we embody it as followers of Christ?

In terms of our response, whether you’re a Christian or perhaps someone like the man, seeking to understand what God requires of you, we both have to answer the same question: Am I willing to let go of whatever I treasure in this world to take hold of Christ?

It’s interesting in this story how both the man who doesn’t know Jesus, and the disciples who already follow Jesus, are both astonished at his words, and both have to learn the same lesson. And Jesus even looks on them in a similar way—just as he looked at the man and loved him in v. 21, so in v. 27, in response to their astonishment, “Jesus *looked* at them [same word] and said, ‘With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.’” Whether you’re a follower of Jesus already or still trying to make sense of God, Jesus’ invitation is the same: hold onto him. Trust him. Follow him. Jesus invites all of us to repent of our self-righteousness and relinquish whatever false gods we cling to, and rest in his astonishing love.

And for those of us who know and follow Christ, we need to ask ourselves what it looks like to embody this kind of astonishing love.

At a bare minimum, it means choosing to *see* people—to *look* at them as Jesus looked at those he encountered. Not avoiding or ignoring them, but seeing people for who they are, where they are, and caring about them. What if you made eye contact with people in the grocery store? What if you made eye contact with people on the street? With people in your neighborhood? At restaurants? The young mom struggling to keep her kids in line. The elderly person sitting alone. I know that’s a hard thing to ask New Englanders to do—to make eye contact with a stranger. But what doors would God open for the gospel? Love begins with looking.

And second, I think it means being careful to not undersell the cost of following Jesus. It’s tempting when someone expresses interest in Jesus to try and make Christianity look as attractive as possible. To emphasize the benefits and minimize the costs—whatever it takes to close the deal. And part of that, no doubt, is our desire to make clear that salvation is not something you earn by your own righteousness or behavior—grace is freely given by the Lord. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t necessary response to that grace—namely, repentance and faith. Self-denial and

suffering for Christ. We're afraid that if we're honest about suffering, honest about how following Jesus costs us everything, that they won't want that. And so we bury that in the fine print. But think about this: *Jesus was willing to let the man walk away, rather than pitch him something he knew he'd say yes to, but wasn't technically true.* If we're going to reflect Christ's astonishing love, we can't undersell the cost of following Jesus. Because to do so would not only be untruthful, it would undersell the benefit—to say that what you gain in Christ, both now and in eternity, is just not worth it. And that's just not true.

Jesus is worth it. There's no greater treasure! Because there's no more astonishing love. That Jesus would not only call us to forsake what the world treasures, but meets us in our weakness and sin and offers us eternal life. That he would give everything to those who can bring nothing, that in him we might have everything. So may we repent of our self-righteousness, and relinquish whatever false gods we're tempted to cling to, and rest in his astonishing love.