

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In our Gospel, Jesus turns His attention to the disciples after His encounter with the rich man. Remember from last Sunday, a man came up to Jesus and, with all sincerity and respect, asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life. After a brief conversation, Jesus gazed upon him lovingly and said, *“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”* (Mark 10:21). But the man turned and walked away dejected!

Jesus looked around at His disciples, and He surely saw their dismay, or perhaps at least their bewilderment. This was going to take an explanation. Jesus offered it: *“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”*

The disciples’ dismay turned to amazement! Here was a pious man, seeking eternal life, one whom God had clearly blessed with great wealth, and you’re saying, Jesus, that it will be difficult for him to enter the kingdom of God? With all of his advantages?

With such talk, no doubt many of us in America will start to squirm, for the wealth the people of our country has produced may be without parallel. And our citizens have reaped the benefits of this prosperity. We may not all be super rich, but we do all have advantages that many people around the world do not have, and that most people throughout the ages have not enjoyed. And so, we wonder about our own entrance into the kingdom of God.

And, indeed, the Scripture is filled with warnings about riches — the vanity of them; Solomon said, *“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income”*; and the deceitfulness of them; in Jesus’ parable of the sower, He explains that the seed *“sown among thorns ... are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful”* (Mark 4:18-19).

Our enemies — the devil, the world, and our sinful nature — use “money and possessions” to “deceive us and mislead us into false belief” — idolatry. Remember, Luther taught that riches are “the most common idol on earth” (Large Catechism, Part 1: 7). The psalmist speaks of the iniquity of *“those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches”* (Ps. 49:6). Job acknowledges that he *“would have been false to God above”* if he would *“have made gold [his] trust or called fine gold [his] confidence”* (Job 31:28, 24). Solomon confessed *“Whoever trusts in his riches will fall”* (Prov. 11:28).

But Jesus did not stop at the rich, lest one think that money alone were the problem. The disciples’ amazement spurred Him to further explanation: *“Children,*

*how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God*” — a statement of more general applicability. It’s difficult for everyone to enter the kingdom of God.

How difficult? Jesus paints a picture that is not easily forgotten: *“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.”* The pointedly clear message should not be blunted or confused by trying to make it somehow possible to do this. In the Middle Ages some suggested that Jerusalem had a “camel’s gate” that people could actually enter through at night when the main gate was locked; even a camel with its baggage removed could stoop to enter by it.

But lest you think Jesus was teaching that it was possible to do this, He answered the disciples’ pleading question: *“Then who can be saved?”* with a clear and simple reply: *“With man it is impossible.”* On his own, man cannot enter back into the Paradise from which he was driven out. The tree of life is out of our reach. Flaming swords bar our way to it.

*“Then who can be saved?”* That question still plagues man, and God’s Son has given the answer. We look not to ourselves to accomplish the impossible, but to God, for it’s a characteristic of God — He is almighty! Nothing is impossible *“with God,”* as Jesus said. *“For all things are possible with God.”*

And God accomplished the impossible through the Son. For God’s only begotten Son came down from heaven, was conceived in a virgin’s womb, and was born a man in the flesh. *“How will this be...,”* Mary asked. The angel answered, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ... For nothing will be impossible with God”* (Luke 1:34-35, 37).

Moreover, this son of Mary would remain holy throughout His life. Though born in the weakness of our flesh, and though tempted as we are, He remained sinless. In this fleshly weakness, Jesus went to the cross, bearing the unimaginable load of the sins of the world, and there the Son of God did the impossible — He died as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. “O sorrow dread! Our God is dead, Upon the cross extended,” we sing (LSB448).

More impossibility happened three days later as the lifeless Jesus returned to life, rising from the grave, victorious over sin, death, and the power of the devil. This is impossible, we are assured by “science,” but the Son of God did it. By doing these impossible things, Christ put into action God’s plan to make possible what was impossible, namely, our salvation.

But there is more impossibility still, for we know that we are born dead in our *“trespasses and sins”* and are *“by nature children of wrath”* (Eph. 2:1, 3). We know that we are saved only by God’s grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9); yet, we

“cannot by [our] own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, [our] Lord, or come to Him.” It is impossible. Therefore, God must take action, making possible the impossible: He makes us alive by His grace (Eph. 2:4-5); He gives us rebirth into the kingdom of God, not by putting adults back into their mothers’ wombs to be born again, but by begetting us from above by water and the Spirit; by God’s Word and Sacraments, the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies [us], and keeps [us] with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (Small Catechism, Apostles’ Creed, Third Article). In this way, God brings us into His kingdom even now, that is, into communion with Jesus Christ, as we await the final consummation of all things and our own eternal life.

Indeed, God works through His Church to extend His Church, which is herself Christ’s body. When you are brought into the Church, you are incorporated into Christ’s body. This He does through the holy gifts that He has given the Church to distribute. Thus, even as there is no salvation apart from Christ, so there is no salvation outside of His Church, as church father Cyprian said long ago. By that, I don’t mean outside a visible church body as Rome teaches, but outside of faith in Christ Jesus, a faith begotten, fed, nourished, and strengthened by the Spirit in Word and Sacrament. And this happens here at Divine Service.

Don’t be like the rich man who sought eternal life by his striving; don’t try to do the impossible. Return to the Lord Your God, gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. Come back to Christ and to His gifts and be first in the kingdom of God.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.