

How Then Shall We Live? : The Beauty of Impossibility

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Psalm 25:1-11, Romans 7:14-8:2, Mark 10:17-31

Our final Scripture reading this week comes from Mark 10:17-31. Listen now to God's Word. "As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good-- except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard 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 man to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.""

When I was a kid, I loved **Mission: Impossible**. All the spy stuff and Ethan Hunt and his team, the cool mission briefings that self-destructed in ten seconds...and there's that theme song: duh duh DUH DUH duh duh DUH DUH. You know it after just two bars. Have you ever tried to dance to the **Mission: Impossible** theme song? It's impossible too, and that's because it's in 5/4 time. Almost all modern music is in 4/4 time. 5/4 time has something you aren't expecting, something different. You may not dance to it, but once a song in 5/4 time is stuck in your head, the groove of it will be there for a long time.

Our final study today on the ethics and morality of Scripture is going to be about an impossible mission too: the impossibility of keeping the Old Testament law and the impossibility of that Law saving us from sin. Now it may seem completely backwards to you that we've spent the whole summer talking about the ethics of the Bible only to say that it's impossible for us to live by its rules. But that's exactly what God did through Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, it's like God changed the music to 5/4 time, to something totally unexpected but totally better. In Jesus Christ, we have not only freedom from the law, but we have the means to actual obey God's intentions for our lives. So let's take a look at what Jesus and the New Testament authors had to say about the Law and how it worked.

A moment ago, we heard the the story of the rich young ruler. It's so important that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain this encounter with Jesus. If you've been in church long enough, you've heard it preached from a variety of angles. The basics are these: a young ruler asks how to gain eternal life. Jesus cites a basic checklist, Old Testament 101. It's as if Jesus is saying, "You know this already, right?" But then the guy makes a challenge – "I've done all that." It's as if he is looking for some greater assurance of eternal life that he doesn't yet have. Jesus has a heart for this man. This rich young ruler has insight Jesus hasn't seen in the Pharisees. He knows there's something beyond the law he's missing. Jesus doesn't give him a principle to learn but an action to perform. Sell all your stuff, Jesus commands, give to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven; you may be my disciple.

The man walks away, sad, because what Jesus has asked of him is beyond what he's willing to give. Jesus exclaims, "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!" He says it's more difficult for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Now openings in the walls of a city that let one person through at a time were called "the eye of a needle." Maybe that's what Jesus meant, or maybe He's talking about the eye of a literal needle. Either way, we're talking either impossible or improbable.

Now consider the craziness of Jesus' request. Jesus doesn't dispute the young man's claim never to have broken the Law. What Jesus asks him to do is way beyond the Law. God gives difficult commands to various people in the Old Testament that go well beyond the Law too, but the rich young ruler never expected himself to be one of them. He knew there was something more to gaining eternal life than just keeping the letter of the commandments...but once he found out what was really required, he gave up. In the final analysis, he had been breaking the first, second, and tenth commandments all along. He was covetous of his own possessions and had made his wealth into an idol he was determined to continue serving.

The disciples were understandably freaked out. They were lowly people, fishermen, tax collectors. They knew they'd broken the Law somewhere along the line. If a man who abided by God's law wasn't righteous enough for eternal life, who was? Peter, the guy who always had to have a comeback, shouts out his frustration – "we've left everything to follow you!" Jesus says, "Salvation is impossible with man, but it is possible with God."

If that wasn't enough to convince us that we can't be saved by following the Old Testament law, remember Paul's words this morning from Romans: "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good." How is it that the law is good? How could something that creates such a desire for sin be good? Paul explains: "Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it." The Law proves we are not inherently good people; it shows us the sin inside of us.

Our inability to follow the Law speaks volumes about us as sinful creatures. It's kinda like this...don't think about pink elephants. I said, don't think about pink elephants. Are you thinking about pink elephants? You have a picture of them in your mind, don't you? Why? Didn't I tell you not to do that? It comes to us naturally, doesn't it? Our first response to being told "no" is to contemplate what it would be like to say "yes."

The same is true in reverse. What's the first thing a 3-year-old does when you ask him to do something? It's always "no." Sometimes you'll tell him to do something he really wants to do and you'll catch him! He'll still say "no" first because that's what he's gotten programmed to do! It's not 'till he gives it a second thought that he says "yes."

So why does the Law exist? Does it act solely as a means of condemning humanity? Not at all! There are several reasons for the Law. First, it clearly shows us that we have a holy God who Himself is ethical and moral. The Law expresses God's character. It shows God's desire for both justice and mercy. It proves that God desires that we be like Him. God loves us enough to spell out clearly for us His intentions with us and for us. Second, the Law shows us how to live. It doesn't save us, it cannot make us perfect, but it details how to walk in God's ways. King David, a man who had trouble keeping the Law if ever there was one, wrote that he "loved" the law and "meditated on it day and night." It provides guidance and direction.

Most importantly, the Law is the signpost that points us to the need for salvation, which we receive through Jesus Christ and through whom we are released from the Law's condemnation. In Galatians 4:23-24, Paul writes that the Law was our "schoolmaster," our "tutor," to "lead us to Christ so that we may be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under our tutor." The Law teaches us the need for grace, the need for salvation outside of ourselves and outside of the Law. The ancient heroes of Scripture were not saved by the Law but by faith. Abraham was a sinner just like you and me, but Genesis 15:6 tell us that "Abram believed the LORD, and God credited to him as righteousness." Romans 4:24 says that our faith in God will be credited to us as righteousness just as Abraham's faith was credited to him. And Romans 7 tells us, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." The Law proves that salvation lies not within following its commands but through faith and trust in the Savior who gave us the Law to direct us and teach us.

It's very easy to get confused about this. Why did God give us the Law first? Why didn't God just send Jesus first to straighten everything out? The best way I can explain it is this: you have to crawl before you can walk. When you don't, there's trouble. Let me give you an example. My high school offered physics your junior year and calculus your senior year. But there's a huge problem with that. Most entry-level physics only makes sense with calculus. I got incredibly frustrated with physics because the mathematics I'd learned to that point didn't cut it. The entire class hated it...all except the one guy who'd waited to take both classes his senior year. Because he learned things in the proper order, physics problems that took us an hour to solve took him five minutes. When you know calculus, physics becomes a breeze.

In the same manner, God gave us the Law first because we needed to learn its limits. We needed to learn what it could and couldn't do. We needed to know that the Law couldn't save us – as Paul wrote, "the law was powerless [to save us] in that it was weakened by the sinful nature [of humanity]." The Law proved our need for a Savior, something we could have never known without the Law being in place. Once the Law was established, Paul says, "God [saved us] by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." Now that we know the Savior and have a personal relationship with Him, we suddenly have a different relationship to God's law and its ethics and morality.

As Christians, what is our relationship to the Law supposed to be? We've talked about all sorts of things this summer from the Law, everything from respecting life and life in community to covetousness and sexuality. How are we to relate to the Law given to us by God?

There are a few answers typically given. The first is this: believe in Jesus, but try harder to keep God's Law. This philosophy says that we need Jesus to save us, but then we need to prove ourselves worthy. I've heard a version of this even at Church of the Covenant: "I believe in Jesus, but I hope I'm good enough for God to accept me." This thought is not uncommon in Roman Catholic theology, and as many of us either grew up in the Catholic Church or had friends and relatives in it, it isn't surprising that it has crept into our thinking.

The problem is, this way of thinking isn't biblical. Remember what Paul says: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." As one of my favorite theologians R.C. Sproul says, "In your thoughts, you break the Ten Commandments every day before breakfast." I can try all I want, but in my own strength, in my own power, I can't do it. I can never be "good enough" to please God.

Here's another way to think about: I'm never going to run a marathon. Physical training is good for me. I go to the gym three or four times a week; I lift weights; I ride a bike. But I can't walk more than a mile without significant pain. "Trying harder" isn't going to make it happen. In fact, "trying harder" might burn me out that much faster. Not only will I not run a marathon, I might stop exercising altogether. In the same way, trying harder to be "good" is only going to burn us out and leave us disillusioned and dissatisfied with Christianity, because it's not what Christ ever imagined we should do.

In Galatians 5:4, Paul strongly warns the church not to turn to this way of thinking. He says, "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." When we say we believe in Jesus but think we must be "good enough," we are still counting on our own good deeds to save us. We think God will be pleased with our efforts, but the opposite is true; we will be alienated from God! We need to throw out any thought that our works are ultimately responsible for our salvation. Our salvation comes not from what we do but from what God has already done through His son Jesus.

There's another thought about the Christian and the Law: that it no longer applies to us at all. The Law is merely a list of nice suggestions we can take or leave depending on our context. In many ways, our denomination has accepted this viewpoint. The idea is that, because of Christ's salvation, we can believe and do whatever we want and still be saved.

But again, Scripture doesn't give us this option. As soon as Paul finished warning the Galatians against clinging to the Law, he told them, "You, my brothers, were called to be free [in Jesus]. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love...live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a clergyman during Hitler's rise to power. He opposed the German church's acquiescence to the Nazis so stringently that he was executed at age 39, 23 days before Germany's surrender. He wrote about "cheap grace" and how it led to the German church acting as a mouthpiece of the state rather than as an outpost of the Gospel. He wrote, "cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance...baptism without church discipline...communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ." Cheap grace is when we see forgiveness only as a means to salvation rather than a road to Christlikeness, when we want God's blessings but do not want to carry His cross, when we have no desire to please God but still want His acceptance. Cheap grace leads to eternal death, not eternal life.

So what's the right response to the Law, to the ethics and morality we see taught in Scripture? It's neither to try harder or to throw it all out. Instead, our best response is to rejoice in our salvation and to live lives in obedience to the Holy Spirit as a way of saying "thank you" for the grace shown to us.

Listen to these passages from Ephesians 5: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God... for you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord... be very careful, then, how you live -- not as unwise but as wise...do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is... be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It's a call to live in grace, to be thankful for God's grace shown to you through the cross of Christ and to spread that grace around you. The Law shows how we can imitate God as Paul encourages – not so we can earn our salvation, but so we grow closer to Him who saves us and wants to be in relationship with us. We can revel in God's grace, knowing that we have been saved for a purpose, to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. We can live thankfully because we know our sinful pasts, and even our missteps in the future, will be forgiven as we stay close to His side.

What we've heard about the ethics and morality of Scripture over the last few months hasn't been easy for any of us, myself included. It's not fun to be convicted of our guilt or our need to change. Sometimes I've heard whispers of things like, "the pastor wouldn't say that if he knew my situation." Yet God's Law never changes. It doesn't bend with the times. It always stands firm to convict us of sin and to prod us along to earnestly plead with God for true faith in Christ that leads to salvation. It stands as a strong tower at the threshold of salvation, pointing us into God's Kingdom as we enter at the foot of the cross. Rather than to worry about how we have transgressed God's Law, as every human being on earth has done, let us move forward in the love and admonition of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, learning from Him, loving Him, determined not to grieve Him but to walk in His ways, knowing that through faith in Him we are forgiven. That's the road of discipleship which we will begin to travel together next week.