

Pentecost 20: October 17/18, 2009

Mission Impossible

Mark 10:23-31

Jesus replied [to the disciples], “With man [salvation] is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Mission: Impossible was a television series which aired on CBS from September 1966 to March 1973, with a remake in 1988-90 and three subsequent motion pictures. It chronicled the missions of a team of secret American government agents known as the Impossible Missions Force (IMF). A hallmark of the series shows team leader Jim Phelps receiving his instructions on a tape that then self destructs, accompanied by the iconic theme music composed by Lalo Schifrin. The series repeatedly put the lead characters into impossible situations, yet they always succeeded through ingenuity, technological wizardry, and split-second timing. Today Jesus describes entrance into the kingdom of God in similar terms. “With man,” he says, “[salvation] is impossible.” We do well to look beyond man. “With God,” Jesus continues, “all things are possible.”

It didn't start out as an impossible request. The rich young man thought we had everything under control. He was just checking to make sure he hadn't missed any small detail in his airtight case to inherit eternal life. “All the commandments I have kept since I was a boy,” he tells Jesus. No mission impossible here. Little does he know. Before Jesus is done he will know just how impossible it is for man to inherit eternal life. To the rich young man Jesus says to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him. *This is a hard word.* To those attracted to or possessed by worldly wealth, Jesus says to beware how easily it can separate you from the kingdom of God. *This is a harder word.* To the disciples Jesus says 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. *This is the hardest word of all. An impossible word.* Little wonder that the disciples cry out, “Who then can be saved?”

What is the message for us? It is threefold. The first word: We all want eternal life. When we're young we think we possess it, we think that we will live forever. If you were born in 1980 you are 29 years old this year. Perhaps similar in age to the rich young man. Your life expectancy is 70 if you're male and 77 if you're female. That means you will live until 2050 or 2057. An eternity away. We were all there at one point in our lives, thinking we will live forever with a passing interest in things eternal. We were all the rich young man, all asking the same question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” We all want eternal life.

The second word: We want eternal life on our terms. Fast forward to the year 2045. *How old would you be then?* Our 1980 born 29 year old, if he or she lives until 2045—at retirement age of 65—can expect to live until age 79 if male or 83 if female. What once seemed like an eternity away now is closer than we care to think about. The question of the rich young man—What must I do to inherit eternal life?—takes on heightened urgency. Don't miss the significance of the personal pronoun. What must *I* do? We want eternal life and we know there is no such thing as a free lunch. So we dust off our halos, make an occasional donation to a favorite charity, maintain a credible if not upstanding reputation. *Lord, is there anything else I must do?* We want eternal life, but we want it on our terms.

The third word: We want eternal life by our means. It is now 2055 and our 29 year old, if still alive, is 75 years old. Due to the wonders of modern medicine he can expect to live until he is 84 and she until 87. No longer an eternity away, not even a somewhat distant reality. Our passing is increasingly imminent and our question increasingly urgent. *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* By this time in our lives we have amassed a measure of means. And not just wealth. An accumulation of, shall we say, “good works” that commend our lives and give the preacher plenty of material so that he doesn't have to lie at our funeral. We top these off with some significant charitable bequests, yet there remains the

nagging question: *Is it enough?* “All the commandments I have kept since I was a boy,” we plead with the rich young man. Tell me if it’s enough Lord. We want eternal life, but we want it by our means.

Jesus puts all such nonsense to rest. If you choose to approach eternal life in this way, then know what my terms are, he says: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It is a stunning word, an impossible word. Like telling the rich young man to sell everything and give it to the poor. Like attempting to coax a camel through the eye of a needle. *Mission impossible*. Rightly the disciples ask, “Who then can be saved?” How many perfect people do you know? Mine is a short list, and he earned a cross for his perfection. What must I do to inherit eternal life? *There is nothing you can do, for your terms are insufficient and your means inadequate*. Let us be clear. “With man this is impossible.” Like asking a person born blind to describe color. Or a person born deaf to appreciate music. Because of sin we are born in spiritually blind and deaf to the harmony of God. Salvation is not on our own possible. It is not possible for us to do *anything* to inherit eternal life. The result of any and every such effort to do so will result in us “going away sad.” In the end Jesus says, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul”?

The Impossible Missions Force in *Mission Impossible* always found a way to accomplish the impossible. Perhaps they got inspiration for the show from an even greater show. “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” God is in the business of making the impossible possible. Who is this God who speaks a word and all creation springs forth? “He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thought to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth—the LORD God Almighty is his name.” His wonders are not restricted to his canvas of the skies or his clay of the earth. “The living God rescues and saves,” declares Daniel. “He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and *on the earth*.” So an angel can tell Mary at the annunciation, “Nothing is impossible with God.” But he does so on his own terms and by his own means.

What were God’s terms to rescue and to save? No mighty man of old like Samson could do. Great King David for all his accomplishments would not even be permitted to build the Temple. John the Baptist, greatest in the lineage of God’s great prophets, was eclipsed by the least in the kingdom of heaven. Even the angels at best could only *long* to look into the unfolding events of God’s great salvation. No, God himself fulfills his own terms. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” God would make the impossible possible by sending his Son, who is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” These are his terms. If you are caught up in the wonder of such action, be prepared to be astounded by the means he would employ. Jesus himself supplies his own means. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” “The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” What must I do to inherit eternal life? Nothing. What has God done to redeem you? Everything. What would he have you to do? Believe. Believe that Jesus took your sins to the cross and paid their awful price, that by believing, you might have forgiveness and eternal life in his name.

Can a camel go through the eye of a needle? Impossible you say. But can a man change water into wine, command the wind to cease, or multiply loaves and fishes? Or even more, can a man who is killed come to life again? Not just any man. The God-man, Jesus Christ. The One who promises “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9) Such faith takes hold of a God who is able to do the impossible. He can create the life of faith where there is only the death of unbelief. He can wrest our death grip on worldly riches so that “simply to thy cross I cling.” He promises the multiplication of his grace in this life and, in the age to come, eternal life. *Mission Impossible?* Not at all. With God all things are possible. Amen.

