

One Thing

By Dr. Paul Tripp

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Paul Tripp Ministries
7214 Frankford Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19135

Website: www.paultripp.com
Online Sermons: <http://www.sermonaudio.com/paultripp>

Well, it was true in the past and it's true today and it will continue to be true until Jesus returns that the greatest threat to Christianity is not activist atheism, the greatest threat to Christianity is false Christianity. The greatest threat to the Gospel is a false Gospel and the reason a false Gospel is a threat is it tells us a couple of things we want to believe about ourselves. A false Gospel will always tell you that you're more righteous than you actually are. A false Gospel will always tell you that you have more power and ability to please God than you actually have and the most important place where that discussion of the true Gospel and the false Gospel takes place is not in the halls of a seminary but in your own heart because you will every day preach to yourself a true Gospel that recognizes your deep spiritual need, the gravity of your own sin, the powerlessness you have to deliver yourself and the hope that can be found in Jesus or you will preach to yourself another Gospel. We're good at it.

Recently I was traveling and I always travel with the man who assists me, Steve, and Steve was pointing out a wrong in me. I wish I could say that I was thankful. I immediately said, "You're right. What I just said was wrong." But as he is pointing it out, I can feel this argument inside of myself telling me, arguing that there was a reason this was the right thing to say and the right thing to do that actually I'm in the right and actually I don't need to be told that I'm wrong in this moment. The false Gospel always will tell you you're more righteous than you actually are and you have more ability than you actually have and in that way, this incident in the life of Christ there in Mark 10 is very important for us. Turn it if you would, to verse 17 of Mark 10 there in your order of worship or page 846 in your church Bibles.

Now Jesus is approached by this man we know from this account and from others that he was a wealthy man. He was probably a ruler in the synagogue and if it's possible to ask the right question and the very wrong question at the same time, this man does it. It's a right question because he's asking about eternal life. What could be more important than to be concerned about eternal life? You know the average person sitting at Starbucks isn't asking that question. They are not on their iPad googling eternal life as they are sipping on their latte. That's not what they are think about. They may be thinking about their budget or a friendship they would like or that they need a new pair of shoes or that the coffee at Starbucks is not as good as it was five years ago but they are not thinking about eternal life and so it's a remarkable thing, it's a good thing, it's a grace thing that a person

would ever be concerned about eternal life. And what this man does is really pretty remarkable too, it's culturally remarkable. This is a rich man, this is a ruler man, and he runs to Jesus who has sort of become this outlaw Rabbi that the Pharisees and Sadducees are after. It's a remarkable thing and publicly he kneels before Jesus, a picture of neediness, a picture of expectancy. It all looks good at this moment. It looks like it's the right man doing the right thing and asking the right thing until you read the rest of the passage and you will see that at the same time, this is the wrong question. Let me tell you the roots of saying that. First of all, this man doesn't know who he is. He doesn't know he is himself. He's assigning himself an identity that he doesn't actually have and we do that too. He's actually telling himself that he's much more righteous than he actually is. So whatever he's thinking about eternal life is sort of structured by this perspective that, "I'm righteous. My life is pleasing to God." So that leads to the fact that he actually believes that there's something he can do within his power to achieve eternal life, there is something he can do to achieve acceptance with God, that he has some kind of power within him to please God. So that sort of structures his question that looks good on the surface that maybe isn't so good after all.

But he's not only confused about his identity, he's confused about the identity of Jesus. He says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.'" Now he says of the man, "You only have these two options. If I'm just a teacher, then you can't call me good because unlike every other human being, I'm fallen, I'm less than righteous. I'm not that good man that you would say I am. So if I'm just a teacher, that adjective doesn't apply to me and if it does apply to me, then I'm much, much more than a teacher, I'm the Son of God. There is no in between there." You can't ever just say, Jesus was a noble, wise, good teacher because Jesus declares himself that he's the Son of God, that he's God. So here's this man asking this question. He doesn't know who he is and he doesn't know who Jesus is and in that way, the question is full of misunderstandings and distortions.

Now, look what Jesus does next. "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.'" Now, what is Jesus doing there? Is he contradicting the Gospel? Is he saying, "Look, the way to achieve eternal life is by keeping the commandments. You go out and keep the Commandments and you'll be okay." Is that what Jesus is doing? On the surface, it appears to be confusing. Well actually, what Jesus is doing is the exact opposite of that. Jesus is using the law in one of the ways that the law was intended to be used and one of the ways it was designed to function. The law is God's ultimate revealer of sin. It is in the mirror of the law that I begin to have an accurate view of who I am. We would like to think that no one has a more accurate view of us than us and the fact of the matter is that we all have places of distortion and delusion in the way that we think of ourselves and so the law is that mirror that we can look in and we can begin to see ourselves as we actually are and we can begin to be aware of the depth of our need.

I remember when Phil Reichen preached through the Ten Commandments. I hated that series. And he would give this narrow definition of the Commandments. I'd think, "Well, I'm kind of okay," and then he'd start to broaden it and broaden it and broaden it and

every one of them I said, "I've just broken this all over the place," and then graciously he would take us to Christ. Jesus is bringing this in front of this man so this man would see himself with accuracy and out of that would be borne conviction and out of conviction would be borne grief and neediness that would drive him to seek the help that only Christ could give him, more than just a teacher, as his Savior and Redeemer.

Amazingly his response is, "I've done all of those things. Teacher, all of these I have kept from my youth." What a shocking response. "You put that standard in front of me, I am okay." Who could say such a thing? Look at Christ's response, "And Jesus, looking at him, was repulsed." Is that what it says? "Looking at him, grabbed him by his cloak and screamed at him, 'Who do you think you are?'" You ought to be astounded at this moment in Mark with this self-righteous, arrogant, self-sufficient, externally religious man who should have known better. Listen, this was a synagogue ruler. If nothing else, he had read the Psalms. He had read David say, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me. My problem is not my performance, my problem is my nature. I came into this world as a sinner. I came into this world as a broken man. I came in deeply needy and there is no hope for me but God and God alone." He should know that. And yet, Scripture says "Jesus looked at him and loved him." How amazing is his grace. How astounding is his love. You should celebrate that grace. You should celebrate that love this evening because in your moments of rebellion, in your moment of self-righteousness, in your moment when you're being your own defense lawyer, in your moment when you're trying to tell yourself that you're more righteous than you are and have more power than you have, isn't it awesome that he doesn't turn his back on you, he looks on you with sweet transforming redemptive love. That love is the single cord of our hope. There is hope for us because of that love.

And then Jesus continues and says, "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." Jesus knows exactly where this conversation is going. He knows exactly what is operating in the heart of this man. The problem with this man is not his performance. The problem with this man is not first his behavior. The problem with this man is the worship of his heart. Jesus knows that this man's heart is ruled by something other than him. Jesus knows that what holds this man is not a worship of the Creator but a worship of the creation. Jesus knows something that all of us should remember, that sin in its essence is idolatrous. In those first few chapters of Romans as an entreaty, an exegesis of sin and what sin does to us, in Romans 1:25, Paul says that we tend to exchange worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of the creation. We tend to love the physical world more than we love the one who created it. We tend to have hearts that are ruled by something that we can see or touch or taste or experience rather than God. That's what sin does to us. You see that idolatry operating in that early moment of Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve would rather have physical pleasure, would rather have autonomy from God than have God. That's the nature of sin. Jesus knows where he's going. What he's saying is, "Would you as an act of faith lay down this thing that is the orienting worship of your life and come follow me?" That's what Jesus is saying.

"Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions." What a tragedy. "No, I would rather have my wealth, I would rather have my comfort. I would rather have my ease. I would rather have my prominence. I would rather have the temporary pleasures of the created world than have you. No, I would rather walk away." That's the struggle of sin. It's not just a matter of an abstract keeping of a set of rules. Listen, sin is always first about breaking relationship before it is breaking rules. Sin is about loving something more than I love God. Sin is not first about something that I do, it's first about what rules my heart and because my heart is ruled by something other than God, that I willingly go beyond God's boundaries, that's sin. And Jesus is after this issue of worship with this man. That is the core of the struggle. Sin in its essence is false worship, idolatrous worship. That's what it is. So I'd rather be right than have a relationship that pleases my Creator. I'd rather have comfort or ease or pleasure or power or prominence or whatever you could fill in. That's what sin does.

Then Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." An interesting comment on the impact, the potential impact of riches on our hearts. Affluence tends to make us comfortable. It tends to remove a sense of need. Affluence tends to trick us into thinking that we're self-sufficient. Affluence tends to be addicting and enslaving. We have much but we want more and we can tell ourselves we cannot live unless we can live at this level. There is an addictive quality to riches.

Now notice the response of the disciples, "The disciples were amazed at his words." Why? Why was this so amazing to the disciples? Well, we'll see in a minute. Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!" Would you look at your order of worship and read that sentence to yourself? "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!" Do you notice how that is different from what Jesus just said. Notice the first statement: how difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. What has Jesus just done with this statement? He has spread this statement wider than just the rich. He says, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!" Then he says, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich person to enter the kingdom of God." There are all kinds of creative interpretations of what that's talking about. It's talking about exactly what it's talking about. It's just that difficult to enter the kingdom of God as it would be to try to stick a camel through the eye of a needle. It's a picture of utter impossibility.

Now, unless you think that Christ is making only a particular application to just the rich people so that you would say, "Ah-ha, that doesn't apply to me because I'm surely not rich so it's got to be a lot easier for me to inherit the kingdom of God than those poor rich people. Thank God I'm not rich because I have a spiritual headstart. I'm ten yards ahead of those people as we're running toward the kingdom." "And they were exceedingly astonished and said to him, 'What, then who can be saved?'" Then who can be saved? As the disciples are listening to this, they are understanding that what Jesus is teaching goes way beyond just a particular difficulty for rich people. They are beginning to understand that all of us have wealth that we hold onto of some kind. All of us have things that make us feel comfortable and make us feel righteous and make us feel self-sufficient and make

us enslaved. All of us deal with the addicting quality of sin. All of us want things in some place in our life more than we want God. All of us are in the same position and so it's utterly impossible for us to do anything to save ourselves. That's everyone. There is a way in which you see it with the rich but it operates in all of us because all of us have some form of wealth, something that we hold onto that keeps us from forsaking all and following Christ. It is impossible for anyone to save himself, to achieve acceptance with God, to merit eternal life.

It is absolutely impossible. Hear what I'm about to say: you will never come to esteem and celebrate the good news of the Gospel unless you accept its bad news first. And there is something in us that argues against that bad news and there is something in us that argues against that bad news. There is something in us that wants us to think that we're the exception and this is the worst of news: there is no hope for us. None. None of us has any hope. None of us has anything that we can bring before God that would turn him. None of us can keep his law. None of us have pure hearts of worship. None of us. The playing field is level. Then who can be saved? It's all of us. That's the Gospel.

And Jesus responds, "With man it is impossible but not with God, for all things are possible with God." There is a way. It's not found in you. It's found in God and God alone. That's why Jesus was on earth. He was on earth more than a teacher, more than someone who would give you the GPS to get to eternal life. He was there as a second Adam who would live a perfect life, the life that we could not live. He was there as the Lamb who would be an acceptable sacrifice satisfying God's wrath. He was there living that righteous life so his righteousness could be given over to our account. He was the Lamb of forgiveness. He was there to conquer death so that there could be new life. Here was this man, righteous as he was, standing in front of the one who would make sacrifice for sin, still wanting to hold onto his own ability, still wanting to hold onto his own righteousness and the disciples got it, there are none of us who are righteous. Who can be saved? Well, there is salvation available in God and God alone and God had sent his Son to be the Lamb.

You just know that this would be a moment when Peter would speak. He had a tendency to speak in high holy moments and Peter says, "Notice Lord, we have left everything and followed you. Doesn't that mean we're in? We've done it. We've forsaken all those things you said to forsake to follow you." It's as if when Jesus speaks, what he's saying is this, "Peter, no, no, no. There is nothing you can do to earn eternal life but I will tell you this, every sacrifice you will make to follow me will be rewarded by my grace because I'm a God of grace and I bless those who follow me. Truly, 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 land with persecutions and in the age to come, eternal life."

Now, there are people who sort of get a health-and-wealth Gospel out of this and say that if you follow Jesus you will be rich. It doesn't really work and I'm not sure that my definition of riches would be 100 mothers, clearly that's not what is being taught here.

God will bless us with his family, that the body of Christ would be a place of love. I have said many times in relationship with God's people, I've experienced intimate, beautiful, loving, faithful relationships that many people live and die and never know. What a blessing. God will meet your needs, the physical needs that you have to continue to follow him, he will meet those needs. God will even bless you with persecution. The honor of suffering for the name of Jesus and the joy of knowing that those sufferings are a tool of continuing grace in your life. Those sufferings are meant to transform you, that's blessing.

Then finally, eternal life. Then Jesus says, "But many who are first will be last and the last will be first." Here is the paradigm of his kingdom. It's those who come with nothing and confess that they are nothing who seriously seek and receive the grace that can only be found in Christ and Christ alone. Those are the ones who receive his honor and his blessing.

I would ask you this evening: what Gospel do you preach to yourself? Oh, not on Sunday morning or Sunday evening but on Tuesday morning and Wednesday night and Thursday afternoon? Husbands, what Gospel do you preach to yourself when your wife points out a sin, a weakness or a failure? What Gospel do you preach to yourself when conviction comes into your heart? Do you fight that or do you receive it as a grace? Do you say to yourself,

"I need no other argument,
I need no other plea;
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that he died for me."

Literally, personal hopelessness is always a portal to hope. The bad news must precede the good news. The righteous don't run for help because they don't think they need it.

Let's pray.

Lord, thank you that into this world of utter impossibility, complete inability, you came with your grace and you live the life that we could not live. You died the death that we deserved to die. You defeated death as we would have been unable to do and through you, we find forgiveness and acceptance and righteousness and eternal life. Remind us again and again that we cannot look inward for hope but hope is found in you and you alone. In Jesus' name. Amen.