JESUS LOOKS AT US AND LOVES US

1. By being brutally honest
2. By accomplishing the impossible

Years ago people in the Orient had a clever way of trapping monkeys. They would take a jar just big enough for the monkey to get his hand in, attach it to something substantial and bait it with a piece of candy. The monkey would reach into the jar and grab the candy. But with his fingers wrapped around it, his little hand made a fist that was too big to pull out of the jar. Because he wanted that candy so much, the monkey would refuse to let go. So there he would sit, trapped because of his greed.

I think of Paul’s words to Timothy: People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. In our text today we meet a man who put his hand in the jar and just would not let go. He was in love with his money. But, perhaps even worse, he was in love with his own goodness. In spite of all this, Jesus looked at this man and loved him. He loved him by being brutally honest with him. He loved him by accomplishing the impossible for him. He does the same for us. JESUS LOOKS AT US AND LOVES US.

While Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem a man ran up to him and fell on his knees. We know from Mark’s account and from the other gospel writers that this man was young, he was rich and he was a ruler. He was probably in charge of his synagogue, which means he was also a religious man. This guy was respected, upstanding and well-to-do. He had a lot going for him. But the conversation he had with Jesus makes clear that he was far from perfect.

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. Some hear in these words a confession from Jesus that he is not truly God. That was not his point at all. Jesus was making clear that only God can be called good. To do good enough to get to heaven, you have to be as good as God. God himself said: Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy. Jesus was being very blunt with this young man. You want to get to heaven? Be as good as God. Keep all the commandments. Be perfect.

The young man almost broke his arm patting himself on the back. Teacher, he declared, all these I have kept since I was a boy. I’m sure he had, to a point. He had kept himself from committing cold-blooded murder. He had not cheated on his wife. He was not a thief. He was not a liar or a cheat. He had been obedient to his parents. Outwardly he looked pretty good. But his heart was rotten to the core.

We are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus then said to him: One thing you lack. 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 was not really telling the man what to do to earn heaven. In love, he said what he said to expose the sin in this man’s heart. This man who thought he had kept all the commandments had not even kept the first: You shall have no other gods. His money was his god. He worshiped his wealth and he was not about to give it up. Rather than confessing his sin, he went away sad, disappointed with the Good Teacher.

Any of this sound familiar? Stop any number of people on the street and ask them: If you were to die today and God asked, Why should I let you into heaven? What would
you say? The vast majority will answer like this man did. You get to heaven by being good! Do we ever think that way? No, we would never do that. Why, we are Lutherans! And yet, that kind of thinking still creeps into our minds. I mean, we are pretty good people. We try to be kind to our neighbors. We try to be faithful to our spouses. We pay our taxes. We obey the laws of the land. We go to church. Surely, that has to count for something in God’s eyes, right? Wrong. In brutal, loving honesty Jesus reminds us that **No one is good – except God alone.** No matter how hard we try, we cannot measure up to God’s demands. We cannot earn anything from him. Well, there is one thing we can earn from him: hell. **The wages of sin is death.**

Does something else about this man remind you of yourself? Jesus said: **How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!** You are probably thinking: **Jesus is not talking to me!** I am not rich! Are you sure about that? Just think of clothing for a moment. How many people in this world have more than one set of clothes, much less a dresser and a closet and house in which to store them? How many people have money to buy new clothes at the store when the old ones wear out or when they just become unfashionable? How many people have a car in which to drive to the store? How many people have a washing machine and a dryer to clean their clothes they buy at the store? And we think of these things as basic necessities. How many video games or movies do you have? Fishing poles? TVs? Computers? Ear rings? Even though the checking balance may not always show it, even though we may be buried under a mountain of debt, we still have a lot more stuff than we need to survive. By the world’s standards we are all rich.

Is that wrong? No. Thank God for being so generous with our daily bread! The problem is not money, but **the love of money.** Sometimes we get our hand caught in the jar too, don’t we? What if Jesus said to us what he said to that man? **Sell your stuff, give to the poor. Then follow me.** Would we react any differently than that man? Jesus, of course, does not require us to get rid of all our stuff, but the question is worth pondering. What is more important to me? My God or my greenbacks? My stuff or my Savior? Which do I spend the most time thinking about? Which do I work harder for? Do I have possessions or do they have me?

You know, it is easy to look at the man in our text and think: **What an arrogant, greedy fool!** It is not as easy to look in the mirror and have the same thought. And yet that is exactly what our Savior wants. Just like he was with that man, Jesus is brutally honest with us. He looks at us and he lovingly calls us sinners to repentance.

How did Jesus’ disciples react to this conversation? 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? As they listened to Jesus’ brutal honesty, they began to wonder if there was any hope for them. After all, they were sinners too. Trying to save themselves was like trying to stuff a camel through the eye of a needle. I don’t know about you, but I can barely feed a thread through the eye of a needle. A 1,500-pound camel? It just will not work.

And that is exactly Jesus’ point: We cannot save ourselves. The Bible says: **No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law.** When it comes to human will or effort, salvation is impossible!

But Jesus accomplished the impossible for us. Just think about all the impossible things he did to save us! He took on human flesh in the womb of a virgin so that he could live under the law as our substitute. That is impossible - but he did it for us. Then he kept every one of God’s laws perfectly at all times in thought, word and action. That is impossible - but Jesus did it for us and God graciously gives us the credit. Then he died on the cross for us - God died on the cross. That is impossible - but Jesus did it for us in order to make full payment for our sins.
and the sins of all people. Then he rose bodily from the grave on the third day. That is impossible - but Jesus did it for us to give us the victory, to assure us of our own bodily resurrection.

Forgiveness for all of our sins, a new life as God’s dear children and an eternity of joy in heaven - we cannot possibly earn these things. But Jesus won them all for us. Through Word and the sacraments, the Holy Spirit gives us faith to receive them - something else that is impossible for us, but not for God. As Jesus reminds us: **All things are possible with God.**

My friends, sometimes - like the rich young ruler - we get caught with our hand in the jar, clinging to the trinkets of this world, trapped by our greed. Thank God we have a Savior who looks at us and loves us. Thank God we have a Savior who, through his Word, bluntly points out our sins and lovingly calls us to repentance. Thank God we have a Savior who lived and died and rose again for us. Thank God we have a Savior who forgives all our sins and gives us eternal life. By the Spirit's gift of faith, let us cling to the One who looks at us and loves us. Amen.

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