

Who Can Be Saved?

Text: Mat 19:16-26

Suggested Hymns:

279, 68, 159, 286, 352

1) The reason for the question

2) No one can save himself

3) Jesus' reassuring answer

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 19:16-26, ¹⁶ *Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"* ¹⁷ *So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."*

¹⁸ *He said to Him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, " 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,'* ¹⁹ *'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

²⁰ *The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?"* ²¹ *Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."* ²² *But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

²³ *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."* ²⁴ *"And again I say to you, 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."* ²⁵ *When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"*

²⁶ *But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The question once put by the disciples of Jesus “*Who, then, can be saved?*” is just as important today as it was twenty centuries ago. At that time there were Sadducees who did not even believe in the resurrection of the dead and quite naturally showed little interest in being saved.

There were also Pharisees who felt that there would be a heaven merely for the Jews and that other people were by their very nationality foreordained to exclusion from salvation.

In opposition to these two groups were the disciples of Jesus, who genuinely thought that they could be saved. They had to admit that they were unable to save themselves. But on the other hand, they must agree that the demands of God in His holy Law were all-inclusive.

With an implied plea for help they came to Jesus, who mercifully not only told them how to be saved, but actually did save them.

As we look around us today, we find that names have changed, but not religious beliefs. We do not call them Sadducees, but now there are people who believe either that they are too good to be damned or that God is too good to damn them. In either instance they are not interested in being saved.

On the other extreme of religious beliefs there are denominations who teach an election to damnation, or that God in an arbitrary manner elected a number of people to be damned. Besides these two groups, we still have those who, like the disciples of old, come to Jesus with the perplexing question how they can be saved.

Your conscience, unless it is altogether dead in trespasses and sins, is bound to ask, “*Who, then, can be saved?*” And unless you are hardened by pharisaical self-righteousness, you will seek help before it is too late.

The question “*Who, then, can be saved?*” is, after all, of tremendous importance to you. Thank God that Jesus not only led the disciples of that early day to ask this question and impressed its importance on them, but also gave the answer which alone can satisfy the seeking soul. Who can be saved? May the Lord bless our meditation as we consider this question today.

1. The Reason For The Question

The question “*Who, then, can be saved?*” came when a certain young man approached Jesus with a different question. In the Gospel according to Mark we are told that he came running and knelt before Him.¹ He was sincere. His own question troubled him. He desired to have the correct answer. He felt that Jesus was the one qualified to give him this answer.

Hence his question, “*Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?*” It was a question entirely different from the one later put by the disciples. He believed in a life hereafter. Steeped in a spirit of self-righteousness, he felt that there was a way of his earning eternal life. He felt that he could merit heaven by his works.

“There must have been something in him of the external blamelessness and honest uprightness of the unregenerate Saul and of the Monk Luther in spite of their error.”² He must have felt that this wonderful Teacher from Nazareth would tell him some specific rite to observe and that then he would be extra sure of having eternal life.

Jesus referred him to the Commandments of the Moral Law. These the young man brushed aside with the remark, “*All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?*”

He failed to see that, in replying to his remark, Jesus had confined Himself to those Commandments of the Second Table which would seem to be comparatively easy to fulfil; those which the young man had worked so hard in his self-righteousness to keep. Jesus wanted show him that if he had not even been able to keep these Commandments, how much less would he be able to do what God had demanded in the First Table of the Law, like fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Still the young man did not recognise his spiritual imperfection. Jesus, accordingly, kept on probing. He told him if he wanted to be perfect, he should sell all he possessed and give it to the poor and follow Him. This test the young man did not pass.

In his rather sheltered life he had been kept from committing many gross sins, but the love of money, which the Apostle Paul says is the root of all evil, had taken possession of his heart. While he had not stolen goods from the poor,

he had not helped them with his goods; while he had not killed his fellow men, he had not helped them to stay alive. He had known to do good but had not done it.

According to God's Word, this was sin to him. The truth struck home. He recognised that, after all, he was not perfect, but he was not willing to make the sacrifice Jesus demanded of him. If it cost him that much to be saved, he would rather not be saved.

In this discussion the groundwork had been laid for the answer to the question which we are studying today. The same question the disciples once asked, ***“Who, then, can be saved?”*** Before the disciples asked the question, Jesus made two brief statements.

First He said, ***“Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven and then proceeded, ²⁴ “And again I say to you, 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 statements are clear. It will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

By a rich man the Lord Jesus does not just mean a person who has considerable wealth, but as He Himself explains in the Gospel according to Mark chapter 10 verse 24, ²⁴ ***“And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!”***

In other words, a rich person in this context is a person who puts his trust in his possessions, and therefore makes his possessions to be his god. This a poor person can do just as readily as one whom we commonly call rich.

In dealing with the young man, Jesus showed the disciples how difficult it is to be saved, and He gave them a practical demonstration. The effect on the disciples was immediate. They were greatly astonished and in an agonised spirit asked, ***“Who, then, can be saved?”***

Just where do you fit into this picture? Many of us may not be classified as “rich” by the other members of our community.

The temptation, then, lies close at hand to skim over this Bible account and pass it off in the familiar spirit of the Pharisee who said, ***‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax***

*collector.*³³ A feeling of sympathy, or perhaps admiration, may arise in our minds for those governments who increase taxes on the rich and help the poor.

The Bible, however, will not let us be done so quickly with this account. The truth is not so simple. Many of us who may not be rich in money may possess other treasures, one person has amassed much learning; another person is enjoying a great treasure of health and physical strength; yet another person is rich in many friends.

A closer examination will show that many of us are rich in some treasure or another. Merely on the basis of this observation, we all need to ask the question ***“Who, then, can be saved?”*** As we consider the interpretation which Jesus Himself gives this term in the Gospel, the circle widens continually. The explanation Jesus gives says, ***“Those who trust in riches.”***

The temptation lies so close at hand to feel that, after all, we are not so bad as the other people and that therefore God really owes it to us to save us rather than others. If this is our opinion, we are really trusting in ourselves rather than in God. We make ourselves, or to speak more correctly, we make our good opinion of ourselves, to be our riches in which we trust.

Or do you perhaps belong to that category of people who feel they are so wise and learned that they need not accept the Word of God at its face value? Then you are indeed trusting in the riches of your learning and wisdom — real or supposed. It is even possible to be rich in poverty. Some are proud of their poverty. They trust they will be saved because they are so poor. Truly, it will be hard for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Surely you have every reason to ask, ***“Who, then, can be saved?”***

2. No One Can Save Himself

There is little wonder that when the disciples heard Jesus’ statement, they asked, ***“Who, then, can be saved?”*** They felt the truth applied to them as well as to others. ***“Who, then, can be saved?”*** The implication was — none of them. They were respectable men. They had been making an honest living. They were zealous for the Law of Moses and the honour of God’s people.

Nowhere in the Gospel do we have the least occasion to doubt that they tried their best to lead a good life according to the Commandments of God. But now

their hopes were shattered. If such a pious person as this young man could not be saved by the good life he had led, how could they?

The truth of their hopeless condition of despair grew on them the more they thought about it. ***“Who, then, can be saved?”*** *What chance was there of their being saved?* Their condition was dark. It was hopeless. Surely your hopes of being saved are not any higher than those of the disciples who came to Jesus with their perplexing question! The fact that you are living in the 21st century and they in the first does not at all change the picture. The imagination of man’s heart still is evil from his youth.

You perhaps have a more extensive learning than they had. But much learning does not necessarily make you a better person. Our prisons are filled with educated criminals. If, then, education is no guarantee to make you better before men, how much less before God!

The simple shepherds worshiped Christ at Bethlehem, but King Herod persecuted Him. Or do you perhaps trust in the fact that you have been a church member for a long time and have been very active in the work of the church? Christ’s Word in our text, ***it is hard*** or” *How hard it will be!*” still stands.

There was Saul in the Old Testament times. He had been very active, a hero in Israel. He was a leader among his people. With singular courage and great valour he defended them against the Ammonites. He became king of God’s chosen race. He was the Lord’s anointed. Yet his end was in disgrace. “How the mighty have fallen!”

Conditions in New Testament times are no better. Judas Iscariot was very active in that first New Testament congregation. He was even treasurer of that group. He had been out on a successful preaching tour. He was able to make contact with the influential people of the nation. He showed interest in the welfare of the poor, and yet he was not saved. ***“Who, then, can be saved?”***

Jesus looked at the disciples and said to them, ***With men this is impossible.*** Need more be said? Jesus Himself indicated the importance of this terrible truth by taking a pause to look at them and then saying, ***With men this is impossible.*** This judgment by the Saviour closes the door to all efforts on your part to save yourself. ***With men this is impossible.***

Impossible! Is there perhaps some mistake? Had Christ not told the young man who had come to Him, *if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments?* Jesus even spoke in our text of a *“treasure in heaven”* which a person would receive for the complete fulfilment of the Law.

Jesus also told another scribe in Luke 10:28, *“You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.”* All these statements are correct, and no attempt should be made to modify their meaning. It is true, any person who keeps the entire Law of God perfectly will be saved. But it is equally true that it is impossible for us to keep this Law of God perfectly. This Law does not merely insist on an outward service.

Rather God demands the entire heart, not some isolated deed of charity, as the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:3, *“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”*

The Law of God demands the unreserved giving of ourselves. *“The gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life.”*⁴ Narrow as the eye of a needle! We cannot get through here unless we renounce ourselves, our idol worship, all our selfishness, our possessions and treasures, our body and life, child and wife, everything we have and might think of.

Outwardly some people may do this, but God does not want us to live a life of self-appointed holiness as is done in the monasticism of the monks. Dr. Luther expressed this truth by saying, *“Works without faith are idolatry.”* What God demands is that we should not put our trust in our works or treasures nor in any way draw away from the Lord. As He says through the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, *“But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it.”*

But all this is simply impossible, just as impossible as that a camel could pass through the eye of a needle. It is so impossible because all mankind has been corrupted through original sin so that mankind puts more confidence in the things of this life and in other creatures than in the Creator. We have no freedom of the

will except to do evil. The verdict of Scripture reads — dead! Dead in trespasses and sins!

The Apostle Paul, who had been regenerated and now was believing in his Saviour, still had to say, ¹⁹*For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I [do].*⁵ If this Paul was so helpless, what must the condition of those be who do not believe in Christ! All this is a hard saying and unpleasant to our sinful nature, especially in our day when people feel so important and so self-satisfied. The saying of Jesus *“With men this is impossible”* is not popular, and yet it is true. *“Who, then, can be saved?”*

3. Jesus’ Reassuring Answer

After Jesus has so positively stated, *“With man this is impossible,”* and has pronounced the divine doom over all those who place any credit for salvation in themselves, He gives His disciples a most comforting and reassuring answer by continuing, *“But with God all things are possible.”*

Jesus does not want us to follow the young man mentioned in our text who went away sorrowful. His words bring joy and hope to the believer’s heart and give all glory to God alone.

Jesus really is the *“Good Teacher.”*⁶ He not only shows our need for salvation, but He brings and gives us this divine salvation. He is good not because we might judge Him to be so according to the standards of our self-righteousness, but He is good because He is the incarnate Son of God.

All that, in the weakness of our sinful flesh, we could not do, He in the divine power of His eternal Godhead manifested in the flesh did for us. All that He demanded of the young man who had come to Him, He Himself did for him. All that the Law of God demands of you, Jesus did for you in your stead. All that was necessary to be done for you to be saved, and which was impossible for men, Jesus did for you. He did it completely and perfectly.

“Who, then, can be saved?” The answer is in Acts 16:31, *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”* Thank God for His gracious answer to our perplexing question. To believe in Jesus Christ and to receive the blessings He has for you is not within the realm of your ability, but again it is the gift of God.

We affirm on the basis of God's Word, *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."*

He does all this in the entire Christian Church through His Word and Sacraments. Indeed, ***"With God all things are possible."*** Possible even to save such sinners as we are. It is possible for Him to show us that we cannot save ourselves. It is possible for Him, through His grace and mercy, to give us the redemption won for us through Jesus Christ. It is possible for Him to make us children of God and heirs of everlasting salvation. This is the one and only hope for your salvation — Christ Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Mary, who died for our sins and was raised again for our justification.

"Who, then, can be saved?" You can! Christ has opened the door of heaven to you. Enter in His name. He invites you as He did His disciples in those early days. He wants all people, and this means you, to be saved. Despair of yourself, your ability, your works, your goodness, but never despair of the love of God in Christ Jesus. Only as you despair of yourself entirely will there be room for Jesus and His love. Nothing else is necessary.

Christ is All in all for you. He has paid the penalty of your guilt, and even now He pleads for you before the throne of His heavenly Father. This is the message that satisfies you and your spiritual needs. It also satisfies others. Many people, perhaps among your very friends and relatives, and certainly many in pagan lands, are asking, ***"Who, then, can be saved?"*** You have the answer. Share it with others. Tell them there is hope. Christ paid also for their salvation with His lifeblood. It will bring happiness into your heart, and you will be happy to tell others, especially when they hopelessly ask, ***"Who, then, can be saved?"*** You can give them the answer: You can! ***"With God all things are possible."*** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Mark 10:17

² Ylvisaker

³ Luke 18:11

⁴ Matthew 7:14

⁵ Romans 7:19

⁶ Mark 10:17