

Who is Good?
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
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Scripture Reading Luke 18:18-27

A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **19** Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. **20** You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother.’ ” **21** He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” **22** When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money[a] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” **23** But when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich. **24** Jesus looked at him[b] and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! **25** Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” **27** He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

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This week I’ve had a really hard time thinking about this passage in light of the headlines about wealth, poverty, hunger, and rich rulers. I finally decided to turn to the world of fiction. Luke’s rich ruler asks what he can do to inherit eternal life - and I thought of Doug Forcett. Doug is a character in a sitcom about the afterlife - earning a spot in

“The Good Place.” “The Good Place” is required viewing, by the way. Without spoiling too much about the plot - the character Doug Forcett is really *good*. He does everything “right.” His lifestyle is off-grid, low impact, vegan. He recycles everything, turns the other cheek again and again and again, gives his shoes away. If he steps on a snail, he has a process for making amends. He gives so much blood the nurses have to give him a transfusion. He wakes up every day thinking about how he will earn his spot in the Good Place. He is obsessed with getting into the Good Place and that goal is the only thing he thinks about.

It turns out that Doug Forcett - model of doing good - isn’t good *enough* to get into this fictional Good Place. The question in this fictional world becomes - if Doug Forcett, pinnacle of human goodness, can’t *do* enough to get into the Good Place, who can? Can anyone?

Now, this is all a sitcom, an imagined world. “The Good Place” is not a Christian framing of human existence or eternal life. In fact, I’d argue that the biggest problem with that sitcom is the absence of God, the absence of God’s grace.

But the parallel between that fictional plot and our walk of faith is obvious, when it comes to the conversation between the rich ruler and Jesus.

The rich ruler calls Jesus *good* - and Jesus points to *God’s singular goodness*. No human is good the way God is good. This is why we sometimes begin worship declaring that God is good, all the time. Not to say the world is doing great but to say God is good.

The rich ruler asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to inherit eternal life?

In response, Jesus gives him an impossible to-do list. Utterly impossible.

“Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

What must you, human being, do? You would have to *do* more than is possible for a human being, if you expect to *earn* your place.

Jesus’ followers are puzzled because they know the bar is unreachable.

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I think the rich ruler has asked the wrong question.

He could have asked, what’s the path to eternal life? The path is through God’s love and grace and mercy. It’s not about what you *do*. It’s about loving God. It’s about putting God first. First before wealth, first before possessions, first before country, first before everything. And actually, more radically still, it’s not in our hands at all. God, whose name is love, has made a place for all of us in that house with many rooms. We can’t earn it - we can’t buy a ticket - but we’ve been invited to it.

The rich ruler *could have asked*, how can I follow your commandments? How can I love God, love my neighbors, meet God within my neighbors?

He could have asked, Jesus: what keeps me from God?

I think that's the question Jesus is answering, actually. This is the point Jesus tries to make to the rich ruler.

If this conversation had been about poverty and wealth alone, Jesus' focus would have been there. And we know Jesus has a word to say about lifting up the poor and lowly. But in this conversation with the rich ruler, Jesus' focus is on the ruler's relationship to God. What separates the rich ruler from God? What barrier has he put in his own way?

There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, according to a later letter by Paul. Jesus says in this very passage, nothing is impossible for God. God is always moving toward us. God is always watching from the porch, ready to run toward us when we come home. Oh, rich ruler, you don't have to do anything. You've already been invited.

But Jesus challenges the rich ruler to see what he is keeping between himself and God. Sell all you have. Fred Craddock says the commandment the rich ruler hasn't been able to follow yet is the one about not having other gods.¹ The ruler is attached to his wealth. He's worshipping another god. His possessions keep him from God *and* his neighbor - through whom he can meet God.²

The rich ruler can't do - can't earn - eternal life. For mortals it's impossible. For God all things are possible.

What the rich ruler could focus on is his relationship with God, and receiving the impossibly beautiful love of God.

This is of course a deeply Protestant principle. Salvation by Grace alone!

¹ *Interpretation* commentary series on this pericope

² A member of Bible study pointed out this connection

And we could stop here. If we were to consider just this conversation. Just this one moment. We could stop at salvation by grace alone.

But the Gospels have a lot more to say about how we should live, what we should do, and what this world should be like.

In just the last few weeks of Bible texts, Jesus has asked us to be persistent in prayer, to practice gratitude, to be humble, to practice forgiveness, to receive the kingdom as would a little child. Throughout the Gospels Jesus asks us to prioritize loving God and building community, and the needs of our neighbors. James' letter says faith without works is dead.

The New Interpreter's Bible, examining this passage, puts this conversation in the context of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of God. Who has a special place in the kingdom? Children, widows, orphans, travelers, strangers, the poor. If the rich ruler is hoping to earn a spot in God's realm, he would be wise to consider that "those who would inherit the kingdom must also be committed to their care." To the care of children, widows, orphans, travelers, strangers, the poor. So maybe Jesus *is* actually asking this of the rich ruler: sell it all and distribute it to the poor. It could both be impossible and still the goal. Again, the New Interpreter's Bible: "The hope of mercy is never an excuse for failure to obey."

Jenna Olson Popp says it this way: "Jesus is inviting [the ruler] into a different and deeper joy found in the promise of heaven and the kingdom of God, a joy that comes when we partake in an even and fair distribution of wealth."³

Let me come back to Doug Forcett, this fictional do-gooder. His only motivation is self-interest. He only wants personal happiness. It's the same with the rich ruler in our text. He's looking out for himself.

³ "What Can We Do: Sermon Prompts" from Church Anew's 2025 Stewardship series.

Jesus asks him - and I think Jesus asks us - to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. To move others up in our priorities. With the hope of grace, not the expectation of perfection.

This text is suggested during Stewardship season. Realistically, none of us are going to sell all that we have and give it to the poor. Yet the challenge and invitation of this text is to consider how to be generous, how to love our neighbor, how to build up a community of faith that tries to build the kingdom of God, in this time and place.

We live humbly, faithfully, lovingly, generously. We give - knowing our individual gifts won't ever be perfect, but with others' and with the grace of God, they might be good enough.

And we celebrate that "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

Amen.