

SERMON: Who Can Be Saved?
TEXT: Mark 10:17-31

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I was always a big fan of the TV show, *Friends*. I still am, and I've seen all 10 seasons more times than I can count. I was reminded recently of one episode in which Joey, the actor, announces that he has been hired to co-host a telethon for PBS. He's especially happy about it because he feels like he's doing a good deed as a volunteer, *plus* he will get good TV exposure which will help his career. Phoebe jumps in to say that Joey is not doing a good deed at all. Instead it's a selfish act masquerading as a good deed. Furthermore, she hates PBS because when she was a child she wrote to Sesame Street but they never wrote back.

An argument begins when Joey claims that there's no such thing as a selfless good deed. That even when Phoebe served as a surrogate mother, giving birth to triplets for her brother and his wife, Joey claims it made her happy, and therefore was selfish. Phoebe then makes it her mission to find a truly selfless good deed.

When Joey arrives on the set at the telethon, he learns that he is just one of at least a dozen phone operators taking pledges. From where he sits, he's not even on camera, and he's very unhappy about it. In the meantime, Phoebe has raked leaves for an old man in her neighborhood. But he rewards her with cider and cookies.

Next, she lets a bee sting her so that he can look tough in front of all his bee friends. It's selfless, she claims, because it's good for the bee, but not good for her that she's been stung. Then Joey reminds her that after a bee stings you, it dies. Finally, Phoebe calls the PBS telethon. Joey answers her call and she pledges \$200. She's not happy about it, though, because she still hates PBS. This is truly a selfless good deed, she gloats. Just then, the host of the telethon announces that they have surpassed the previous year's pledge total with her donation, and he goes to congratulate Joey, getting him a close-up from the camera. Phoebe squeals with delight that her pledge got Joey on TV, then immediately realizes what's happened: "Oh, no!"

This illustrates the kind of conundrum in which the rich man finds himself when he asks Jesus what he needs to do to "inherit eternal life." Jesus first reminds him of the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." And the man replies with confidence, "I've always done all those things."

Then Jesus tells him that he must relinquish all of his money and possessions, let go of everything and give it all to the poor, and then follow Jesus.

“When [the man] heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Now, before we begin to think that this is a lesson for the wealthy only, let's admit that no matter how much we have it would be just as difficult to give it all away. We all treasure our possessions. So, we mustn't close our ears or begin judging those around us. This message applies to all of us.

Furthermore, we need to understand that for the Jews, wealth and health and good fortune of all kinds were a sign of God's blessing. It meant that God was pleased with you. It meant that you were counted as righteous, or right with God, and such blessings were your reward. So this rich, Jewish man is not only shocked and grieving, but very likely confused. How can he enjoy so many blessings and be so true to the commandments, how can God be pleased with him while Jesus tells him he's *not qualified* for eternal life?

WHO CAN BE SAVED if he can't?

The first problem is clearly that when forced to choose between his own desire to hang on to his possessions and serving the poor, he chooses himself. He puts himself first.

To be fair, maybe he was already a generous person - we don't know. Maybe he already gave away half of what he owned or more. But Jesus was asking for one hundred percent. All of it. Which is really unreasonable if he meant it literally.

A woman who was a member at the church I served in Iowa often gave quite generously to the church. She took her faith seriously, and her heart was in the right place. But she was also known to post-date her check or even ask for it back in the next couple of days, when she realized that she needed that money to pay her bills. She and her husband were not wealthy people, and if they didn't take care of themselves they would become a burden on someone else. Her generosity wasn't serving the poor; it was making her one of them.

In terms of following the commandments, one commentary I read pointed out that the commandments Jesus mentions in this passage are all from what's known as the Second Table. The First Table includes commandments one through four, all having to do with how we relate to God and how we show our love for

God. The Second Table includes commandments five through ten, the rules about how we are to get along with our fellow human beings, how we show love for our neighbor.

Perhaps Jesus knows that this man's love for God is faithful and true, but his claim about *always* following the other commandments is suspect. Sure, it's easy enough for us to refrain from murder or theft, but when you factor in lying, cheating, envy, and adultery? Our scores are less than exemplary.

The question remains, WHO CAN BE SAVED? Who holds the key to the kingdom?

Now Peter takes up the case for himself and his fellow disciples, reminding Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." And Jesus appears to agree: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life."

There it is! Whatever they've given up to follow Jesus, they will get back a hundred times more before they die... and go to heaven. Now we're talking rewards!

But, before we get too excited, let's look at this more closely. Those words right in the middle of all those rewards: "for my sake and for the sake of the good news." This must be the motive for their sacrifice.

It turns out that the rich man is only interested in his own salvation. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is the wrong question. Motive matters.

We're supposed to be trying to save others, not ourselves. We're supposed to be saving others from the ills and the evils of this world. We're supposed to show our neighbors love and respect and acceptance to make this life better for everyone. Not just to check that off the list so that we can go to heaven. We're supposed to be the last one on the train, if you will, - not so we can be the first to enter heaven - but to make sure everyone else gets there.

"But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This story about Jesus and the rich man teaches that our striving ought to be toward following God's commandments. To love God. To love our neighbor. And no matter how wealthy we are, we ought to spend time in prayer about how much we need and how much we are called to give.

WHO CAN BE SAVED? It's not a race. It's not a competition. It's not even about getting to heaven. It's about selfless good deeds. We need to be about saving one another, here and now. To make the world a better place for all God's creatures. To bring God's kingdom "on earth, as it is in heaven." To go where Jesus would go. To love whom Jesus would love. For his sake. And for the glory of God!

AMEN.