

MYTHCONCEPTIONS:

“I Think I Can, I Think I Can . . . I Guess I Can’t”

A sermon by

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Sunday, January 10, 2021

TEXTS: Romans 7:14-26 and Luke 18:18-30

Luke 18:18-30

A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.” He replied, ‘I have kept all these since my youth.’ When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 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.’

Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ He replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’

Then Peter said, ‘Look, we have left our homes and followed you.’ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.’

Romans 7:14-26

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

It is a favorite of many American children. It was one of my favorite books as a little guy. It fits that American positive, “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” attitude.

It is the story of a little switch engine whose only job is take a few train cars and transfer them from one track to another in the yard. His work isn’t hard. Neither is it in any way glamorous, like the jobs of the bigger engines.

One day, a huge trainload of toys, scheduled for delivery to children on the other side of the mountain is stalled in the yard. The big engine that pulls them has broken down. None of the other engines want to risk the trip. They believe themselves too small, too weak, too underpowered.

The children cannot be without toys! This is a crisis! Finally, the little blue switch engine says that he will give it a try. He begins to pull the train up the mountain. He stutters, he starts, he strains! It is a Herculean task. He encourages himself up the mountain.

“I think I can. I think I can. I think I can. I----think-----I-----can.” He reaches the top of the mountain and begins his descent into the valley. The whole way down the mountain, he repeats to himself, “I thought I could. I thought I could.” He arrives at the station with the load of toys to the cheering of hundreds of grateful children.

It makes a great children's story! It also makes lousy theology.

Back in the 1970s, Dr. D. James Kennedy, pastor of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida developed an evangelism training programs that led to the explosive growth of Coral Ridge and many other churches. It was called, somewhat obviously, Evangelism Explosion. The whole approach to sharing the Gospel message centered around getting those trained to ask people two questions. First question. If you died tonight, are you certain that you would go to heaven? Most people who are asked this question answer affirmatively.

Then there is the second question. "How would you answer if God asked you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?'" Most people also answer the second question by saying that they have tried to live a good life. They have never killed, never stolen anything significant, told only little white lies. They are good people; better than most; not as bad as many. They are hoping, as we all did when we failed to study for a pop quiz or major test, that the teacher will grade on a curve.

Theologically, this is the legacy of Pelagius. Pelagius was an Irish monk, born in the fourth century. The life of a monk was austere. Life consisted of fasting and prayer. All of life was the pursuit of God, the quest for holiness in all things. At some point Pelagius made his way to Rome. It was the twilight of the Roman Empire.

Pelagius was shocked by what he saw in Rome. Gross immorality was everywhere. Even the church was polluted, a moral cesspool. Pelagius was rightly upset. However, his solution was faulty. Believers were not trying hard enough! Pelagius taught that human perfection is possible.

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus says, "*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Pelagius concluded that God would never require of human beings anything that they could not do. Humans have free will. They can choose to obey or disobey. If they obey, they can be perfect. If they disobey, well . . .

The Pelagian view is that we are sinners because we sin. If we would just stop sinning, we would no longer be sinners. Problem solved! What of Adam? Adam was created good. When he sinned, he served as a bad example. He chose to disobey God. We don't have to be like him. We can do better. We are created good, too. If we just make good choices and choose to obey God's commands, we can avoid Adam's sin and Adam's mistake.

Do you see the problem? It is an enormous one. What about Jesus? What about grace? Pelagius has an answer. If Adam is a bad example, Jesus is our good example. He shows us that it is possible to be perfect.

And grace? Pelagius says God gives us grace in the form of free will so that we might choose God and God's way. He also gives us his word so that we might know what God expects of us.

So here is my question. It's probably your question, too. Why am I so screwed up? I get to ask that question, too. Why are you so screwed up? Why is the world so screwed up? Are we just lazy? We know what is right? Why do we, even as believers, still sin? Shouldn't we know better by now? Are we born innocent and free to choose God's way or not?

The Church concluded that we are not. Scripture doesn't give us a choice. Unregenerate men and women do not have a totally free will. We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. It is our nature.

The rich young ruler comes to Jesus. He asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says, "You know the law." Jesus gives him the moral law, the second tablet of the Law of Moses. Don't kill. Do not commit adultery. Don't lie. Don't steal.

The man responds, "All these I have kept, from my youth." Just like the second Evangelism Explosion question, the man seeks to justify himself. "See Jesus, I'm a really good person." Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, he justifies himself. "I thank God that I am not like other men. I tithe. I pray. I fast. Is it enough? God are you satisfied yet?"

Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. Could Jesus be setting us up? Could it be that the Law, revealing God's expectations, also reveals how careless, how ineffective, and how insufficient are human efforts to save themselves.

I think I can . . . I think I can . . . I think I can.
Alas, I cannot.

Jesus says to the rich young ruler, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The man goes away.
Jesus did not start with the commandment, "You shall have no other Gods before me." His command to let go of his wealth revealed the rich young man's true god.
You must love the rich young ruler. I believe Jesus did. Immediately after the camel through the eye of a needle remark, Jesus's disciples seem to be in total despair. If the moral and the rich cannot make it into the Kingdom of God, what hope do we have? They ask, "Who, then, can be saved?"

Jesus response? “What is impossible for mortals, is possible for God.” Was Jesus only speaking of the rich young ruler here? Was he talking only about the rich? I believe Jesus was talking about human inability for their own salvation. Humans can no more save themselves from sin and hell by their own efforts than a drowning man can save himself by lifting himself from the ocean by his own hair. Granted, some of us would have more trouble lifting ourselves from the water than others!

In Mark 10:45, Jesus says, *“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* He never says anything about being an example. He never talks about showing his disciples how to be perfect. In fact, in this morning’s Gospel reading, Jesus reacts to the rich young ruler salutation, “Good teacher” by saying, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.”

If Jesus is merely our example of what a good man is and what good people we might become by following his example, why did Jesus go to the cross? Why did he die? Why did God raise him from the dead?

The answer is that Scripture teaches that salvation cannot come from within us. It cannot come by our own actions. It can only come from beyond us, outside of us, a goodness not our own.

Well, what about our free will? Saint Augustine taught that only Adam and Eve truly had free will. With their sin, their choice against God, they lost their free will. So did everyone who came after them. Only Adam and Eve had the ability not to sin. They are not merely an example of their own sin. They are patient zero in a generational pandemic of sin. Ever since Adam and Eve, we sons and daughters of Adam and Eve have lost the freedom not to sin.

Except we are born again, unless we become new creations in Christ, we are stuck. The truth is that most people do not really try to live good, moral lives. Even the most ardent Christian would admit the possibility of being more fervent in prayer, more given to good works, more attentive to reading Scripture, and more regularly engaged in service to others.

What if you really, truly tried to pursue holiness and perfection? Could you do it? Listen to what Paul says about living under the Law of Moses in today’s second reading. *“For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”*

Paul is talking about the sin nature. No human being is born morally neutral. Original sin is the real deal. It distorts and perverts our perceptions, our decisions, and all of our actions. Psalm 14 describes the human condition well. *The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” (Psalm 14:3)*

If no one does good, not one, we are in a heap of trouble. I think I can . . . I think I can . . . I guess I can’t! Paul knew all about self-righteousness. In Philippians 3:4b-9, he writes: *“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” Paul also knew that his own righteousness could never be enough. As human beings, we are content to rearrange the moral furniture of our lives, asking, “Is this enough? Have I done enough? Have I done it right? Will this get me into heaven?”

God wants the whole structure down. He wants a new creation. He is not satisfied with rearranging the pieces of our broken lives. He wants to give us a whole new life. He does it through his Son Jesus.

There is a wonderful story that comes from the historical account of the funeral of Franz Josef I of Austria in 1916:

For more than six hundred years the Habsburgs exercised political power in Europe. When Emperor Franz-Josef I of Austria died in 1916, his was the last of the extravagant imperial funerals.

A procession of dignitaries and elegantly dressed court personages escorted the coffin, draped in the black-and-gold imperial colors. To the accompaniment of a military band’s somber dirges and by the light of torches, the procession descended the stairs of the Capuchin Monastery in Vienna. At the bottom of the staircase was a great iron door leading to the Habsburg family crypt. Behind the door was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna.

Following the prescribed ceremony, the officer in charge of the procession knocked on the iron door and cried, "Open!"

"Who goes there?" responded the Cardinal.

"We bear the remains of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the grace of God, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Styria, . . ." The officer continued to list the Emperor's thirty-seven titles.

"We know him not," replied the Cardinal. "Again, I say, who goes there?"

The officer spoke again, this time using a much abbreviated and less ostentatious title reserved for times of expediency.

"We know him not," the Cardinal said again. "Who goes there?"

The officer tried a third time, stripping the emperor of all but the humblest of titles: "We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!"

At that, the doors swung open, and Franz-Josef was admitted.

Pelagius was a favorite with the senatorial families of Rome. Why not? They were the elite, the powerful, the wealthy, and purported themselves to be paragons of at least civic, if not moral virtue. They deserved what they had because they saw themselves as better than everyone else. If Pelagius is right, salvation and heaven are for the achievers. Salvation is merit-based, only for the few, and has nothing to do with grace.

However, as Franz-Josef's funeral attests, in death we are all the same. No matter our titles, our good deeds, our wealth, our standing, our fame, or our efforts . . . we all stand in need of grace.

In Jesus, God gives us grace for salvation, if we will accept it. God also gives us grace for sanctification. We can do better. We can live better. We just can't do it by ourselves. We just can't do it alone.

I think I can . . . I think I can . . . I guess I can't.

Thank God that God, in Jesus Christ, can and does what we cannot.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. AMEN.