**The Lawful Use of the Law**

**Mark 10:17-27 (ESV)**

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July 23, 2017

***17*** *And as he* [Jesus] *was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him,* *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* ***18*** *And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone**.* ***19*** *You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’”* ***20*** *And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”* ***21*** *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* ***22*** *Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

***23*** *And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”* ***24*** *And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!* ***25*** *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”* ***26*** *And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”* ***27*** *Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God.* *For all things are possible with God.”*

Let me begin today by asking a stupid question. I know some people claim that there’s no such thing as a stupid question. But, that’s just kind of something that people say so that the audience isn’t afraid to ask or afraid to speak up. Stupid questions definitely exist, and I’m going to prove it to you, because here’s my stupid question: Was Jesus a good evangelist? I mean, did He really know what He was doing out there during His ministry? Did He always utilize the best approach when He’s calling people to repentance and faith? That’s a stupid question, right?

Can anyone ever read any of the Gospel accounts and legitimately think to themselves, “I think Jesus should have said something differently in this situation. I think there could have been a better response that He could have given.” Well, let’s be honest with ourselves and at least admit that He, at times, gives befuddling or curious answers to the questions that He’s asked. The disciples were sometimes confused and then they’d follow up with Jesus on certain things. “What did you mean by this?” They’d ask for clarity on some of the things that He said to people. So it’s not a shameful thing to not immediately fully understand everything that Jesus says in response to the inquiries He got from people. I don’t think we need to be ashamed about that. I mean, He is God. He could read the hearts and minds of every man and woman that He ever spoke to. He knew the future. He was, at every moment of every encounter, providing the very life and the very breath for every word that was being spoken. If we thought just like Him, then we’d have the mind of God Himself. So let’s begin with the understanding that no, we don’t always know what Jesus is getting at when He responded to people. And the reason I ask all this is because in our text today, Jesus is asked this question.

***17*** *“… what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

I want you to keep that man’s question at the back of your mind. We’re going to come back to it in just a minute. Let me first lay out the themes and the points that we’re going to be looking at.

So in this encounter, we see Jesus demonstrating the lawful use of the Law as a precursor to the Gospel. In the past two weeks, Ritch has been teaching about some of this theology. And here, we’re going to see Jesus really apply it in many ways—some of the theology we’ve heard for the past two weeks. There are certain elements of this passage we don’t really have time to cover, so we’re just going to look at three primary points.

**I. The Gospel of Jesus Christ presupposes the law of God.**

**II. The Law of God does not bend to the will of man.**

**III. Salvation is only possible with God.**

So that’s where we’re headed. I want to go back to that original question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In a lot of ways, that’s the question every Christian wants to be asked. That’s essentially an open invitation to tell the Good News to whoever is asking it. That’s someone letting us know, “Hey! I’m all ears if you want to go ahead and tell me the reason for the hope that lies within you. Tell me the Gospel. How do I get saved? How do I inherit eternal life?” What believer does not long for that question? Who here wishes that finding opportunities to proclaim the Gospel and share our faith was as easy as somebody just walking up to us and blurting this out? All of us, right? Yet, who here would give the answer that Jesus does? Who would respond to this question with Law instead of the Gospel? Because look at Jesus’ answer. He doesn’t tell him the Gospel. Jesus’ response is nothing but Law. He goes straight to the Ten Commandments.

***19*** *You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’”*

So Jesus answers the question about inheriting eternal life by giving this man pure moral law. No Gospel. No call to faith. Just law. What’s He doing? Why does He say that? Who among us would ever do that? Who would give this kind of answer? I know if I was asked this question about how to inherit eternal life, I would immediately say to someone, “Trust in Jesus. Repent and believe. Believe the Gospel.” And that’s why I raised my stupid question at the beginning. Was Jesus just off His game that day? He simply forgot that salvation cannot be earned or worked for through the Law? That the Law will save no one? Of course not! He knew exactly what He was doing. He was laying the groundwork for this man’s potential salvation by lawfully using the Law. But this guy, he hears the Law and he simply responds with this affirmation of obedience.

***20*** *And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”*

He’s telling Jesus, “Yes, yes. I’ve done those things. So I’m good, right? I’ll inherit eternal life. I’m good.” The rich man is kind of thinking like one of the Pharisees. His external conformance to the Law is equivalent to the internal conformance of his heart. But Jesus knows the standard. It’s both outward and inward perfection. The Law of God demands perfect, perpetual obedience. If you break one Law, you fail! You’re a lawbreaker and you’re condemned! (James 2:10)

The parallel account of this encounter in Matthew 19 gives us a slightly fuller response from Jesus.

**Matthew 19:20-22** The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Jesus recognizes that this man is claiming perfection. He has heard the Law of God and his response is, “Yes. I’ve done that. I’m a perfect law-keeper.” But Jesus doesn’t just remind this man of the details of the high standard of the law to demonstrate his failure. He actually plays along and He forces this man’s sin to manifest itself. Jesus knows this man’s heart and He loves him enough to crush his foolish self-righteousness under the weight of the Law of God. Did you notice what Jesus left out of His selection of the Ten Commandments? He listed five through nine. But what is the tenth commandment? I’m just going to kind of test your Sunday School knowledge here. The tenth commandment:

**Exodus 20:17** “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

So Jesus left off the last one dealing with covetousness, with greed, and materialism and the love of money. All that is tied up in the tenth commandment. It’s a sin that is entirely internal. And guess what? What do you think this man’s besetting sin was? Materialism. A love for his possessions. This man lived a life in violation of the tenth commandment. He had a covetous heart. He was materialistic. He was a law-breaker and he stood condemned. He has not kept all these from his youth. And he proved it because Jesus calls him to give up his possessions in order to be one of His disciples. Jesus says, “Give it all away. Walk with Me every day, sitting under My teaching. Become one of My followers.”

We who are believers understand what this means. There is not a thing in this universe that we would trade for this opportunity. Not a relationship that we could possibly have, not any amount of money or any desire that we could have satisfied. There is nothing that we would trade for being a disciple of Christ. To literally walk and talk with God in the flesh. To sit under the teaching and learn firsthand from the Creator of the universe. If we were in this man’s position, we would not be able to contain our excitement! We’d sell it all. We’d give it all away in a heartbeat. What Jesus offers is priceless! It’s absolutely priceless! Just imagine it. “Here, take it. It’s yours. Here’s the deed to my house. Here’s the keys to my car. It’s all yours.” It’s like giving away the change in your cup holder for an inexhaustible checking account. Or a doodle on a napkin for the Mona Lisa. We wouldn’t even hesitate. But what does this guy do?

***22*** *Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

He just hangs his head, turns around, and walks away sad. “I can’t do that Jesus. You see, it turns out that I got a lot of stuff. I’m rich. I don’t want to stop being rich.” This guy’s nuts! He’s turning down Jesus because he has a lot of stuff. Fine clothes that are going to wear out. A big house that will crumble. Livestock that will die. And money that will be irrelevant the moment that he dies. He asked about eternal life, but then he turns it down for temporal pleasure. And so, off he goes—a disappointed materialist. Behold the power of sin! But also, behold the wisdom of our Lord!

**I. The Gospel of Jesus Christ presupposes the law of God.**

It’s starting point is that we are all sinners. We cannot accept the good news about our sins being paid for and the Law being kept on our behalf, if we are foolish enough to think that we have no sin, that our law-keeping is good enough. It’s not! It never will be. We have all broken the Law of God. And without Christ, we will stand condemned as law-breakers, like this man. Our law-keeping, no matter how good, is not good enough. It is not perfect!

Let’s think about this man. Let’s at least assume he’s not utterly and completely delusional in his own self-evaluation. And what I mean is that he likely had significant external conformity to the Law. He was probably fairly pious on commandments five through nine, as he claimed. He probably did a decent job at it. He’s certainly not perfect, but still, legitimately devout. So it’s no stretch to say that this man probably had far more good deeds than bad. But this goes to prove that salvation is not a scale. Our good deeds are not weighed against our bad deeds. We cannot make up for evil by doing good. If you want the reward of eternal life, then you must be perfect. This man asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him what he must do—never, ever sin and only and always do good. So He answered this question honestly. He gave him the full weight of the Law of God. And it did to this rich young man what it will do to any man. It crushed him! It condemned him as a sinner.

Does it strike you as strange that this law that we have cannot save us? Why is the Law in place that demands perfection from us in order to be saved? We know that nobody can do it perfectly. No one’s getting saved by it. If it cannot save, then was Jesus lying to this guy about doing it to be saved? There’s another stupid question. Right? I’m full of stupid questions today. Obviously, Jesus wasn’t lying. So what’s the deal with the Law. Is it able to save us, or is it not? Is it good? Is it bad? Well, it is good, but it’s not Good News. It’s not bad, but it is bad news. Let me give you an illustration that I think brings some clarity about how the law works. And I’ve used this in some of my classes, so some of this might be a repeat for some of you.

Imagine you’re stuck on a desert island. You have no way off. You’re too far away from the mainland or civilization. No one knows you’re there. There’s no search party. You have no means to be rescued from this island. Except, sitting right there in the middle of it, is a perfectly functional helicopter. It’s got a full tank of gas. It’s mechanically sound. There’s nothing wrong with it. The only problem is, you do not have the first clue on how to fly a helicopter. And if you even try, you’re guaranteed to literally crash and burn. And obviously, you only have one shot. Because you know that as soon as you try to fly it, you’re going to wreck it. And once you wreck it, it’s incapable of getting you off the island. So instead of being a means to your rescue, to your salvation, to you rejoicing because you can be saved, this helicopter is useless for that purpose. It just taunts you. Every day, you see it. And instead of rejoicing, you’re reminded of your failure to fly. You’re daily and constantly reminded of your need for a pilot. Someone to do it for you. And so the law is for us.

It’s perfectly capable to save us in and of itself, just as that helicopter is capable in and of itself to fly you home. Meaning that if the law is kept perfectly, it will merit the reward of eternal life. God has obligated Himself to save anyone who is entirely obedient. But because of our inability, we require someone to do it for us. We need a perfect law-keeper. And the law reminds us of this. It shows us our need for Christ. It doesn’t give us good news about salvation. That’s not what it’s there for. It’s deadly! It’s bad news. It tells us we will not inherit eternal life. It shows us that we’re not perfect. We will not meet the standard of perfection established by God. We can’t do it! The standard that was failed to be met by Adam, by Israel, by Abraham, by Moses, by David, by Solomon, by every king of Judah, by every king of Israel, by every prophet of God, by every man, woman and child that has ever lived, save one. Jesus Christ!

This rich man started this conversation pretty well. He comes up and he addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher.” And Jesus seized on that immediately.

***18*** *And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.*

He was not correcting this man’s phrase. He was not saying to this man that “you’re wrong to call Me good.” And He’s certainly not saying that He’s not good or that He’s not God. He was proclaiming His own deity. “There is no one good but God, and I am God. Why are you calling me good unless you’re prepared to acknowledge who I am?” So this rich man goes away with a lot to think about. He knows he’s a sinner. He found out he’s a law-breaker. He knows he needs someone to do it for him. And if he put any thought into what’s just been said to him, he realized he just finished a conversation with God Incarnate.

So we see Jesus demonstrating for us the lawful use of the Law. He shows one of its primary purposes—to reveal to us, sin. And that is the groundwork for the Gospel. That is why the good news is so good. The law shows our inadequacy and our great need. Maybe this rich man eventually realized all this, or maybe he didn’t. We don’t really know. But for the time being, he goes away sad. And that brings us to our second point. Points 2 and 3 aren’t nearly as long.

**II. The Law of God does not bend to the will of man.**

The Law is not dulled in its standard or its delivery to prevent us from feeling bad. It’s supposed to make us feel bad. We’re not meant to get warm fuzzies in the face of our own sinfulness. If you feel good about your actions, about your law-keeping, after hearing the law of God, you were not listening. And Jesus knew this man’s heart when He did all this. He knew what this man’s reaction was going to be. Jesus was not caught off guard when this guy reacts the way that he did and becomes sad and slinks away. Bad news makes people sad. Especially when it’s about not inheriting eternal life. And the Law makes people feel bad because they’re being confronted with their sin. They feel guilty. But as Sinclair Ferguson says, “Guilt is not actually a feeling. Guilt is a legal standing. What we feel is shame.” This rich man is sad because the Law forced him to experience the reality of his guilty standing before God. And the world today is convinced that if someone feels bad or someone gets offended by the Law, then the Law must be wrong and therefore it needs to change.

The idea today in liberal and progressive churches is to accept the relativistic morals of our day as proposed by the socially and politically correct intelligentsia, in the hopes that the church will somehow become less repugnant to those that hate it. “See, world. We’re accepting your morals. Now come to church.” We as Christians are then condemned for advocating Godly morals because it makes people recognize and experience their guilt. And they don’t like it. And that’s only going to get worse. So we have to get used to it.

If this interaction between Christ and the rich man occurred today, how would the world react to it, do you think? Probably by calling Jesus insensitive for judging the man and making him feel bad. There is no higher social crime in acceptable society than judging somebody. Who knows? Maybe this guy was born with the propensity to covet. Maybe materialism is part of his self-identity. In that case, isn’t Jesus just a bigot for making a covetous man feel bad for being covetous? How dare Jesus imply he ought to repent! He was born that way. It must be okay. Right? Isn’t Jesus all about acceptance and unconditional love? Doesn’t He just love and accept everyone exactly as they are?

Is that not how the world would have us think? They take their misunderstanding of Christ and His love, and then they impose it on us as His followers. But Christian love is not unconditional affirmation of what every person wants to do. The most hateful thing that you could do to someone is convince them that God tolerates their sin. This interaction between Jesus and the rich man shows us again that Jesus upheld the law and He did not tweak it at all to prevent someone from feeling bad. And the world calls that hateful. I’m sure we’re all sick and tired of hearing how hateful that we are as believers for opposing sins like homosexuality or transgenderism or premarital sex, or for upholding the doctrine of hell, or for believing Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and all other religions are false. The default understanding is that if someone feels bad or gets offended, then whatever is making them feel that way is therefore wrong. But this tells us literally the exact opposite.

***21*** *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him…*

And then He gives him the bad news. It’s a message of condemnation delivered out of love. Telling this man something he did not want to hear and that made him sad was an act of love. One Christian sister puts it this way: “I would rather offend you for the moment with the Gospel as the motive, over affirming your destruction under the guise of love.” When we convey the bad news of the Law of God, it is out of love. Bad news makes you feel bad, but when it is true, it is very loving. If a doctor knew you had cancer and he didn’t tell you because he knew that you would cry about it, or worse, he told you that cancer was perfectly natural and actually good for you, then he’s not acting in your best interests. He’s not being loving. He’s actually being very, very selfish.

Delivering bad news doesn’t feel good to us either. It doesn’t feel good to receive it. It doesn’t feel good to give it. But if someone wants to know how to inherit eternal life, and yet they don’t think that they’re actually a sinner or they don’t think that they need to turn from their sin, then you need to tell them the bad news. You need to give them the Law that condemns them. And like Jesus, we cannot bend it. We cannot dull the edges of it. It does not flex to meet our own personal peccadillos and the sins that we struggle with. We must act out of love by delivering the full truth that everyone is a sinner, ourselves included. If they are not convinced of that, they will never be able to accept the good news. They will have no need of a cross. They will have no need for a Savior. We cannot preach a neutered Gospel, void of the actual need for Jesus. We must preach both Law and Gospel. They are an inseparable pair.

The Gospel is the solution to the problem of man’s sinfulness, and the Law is the indicator of man’s sinfulness. You lose one of those, you lose it all. We must recognize that men are sinners. God has wrath for sin and we will all come under His judgment outside the cross of Christ. People hate this idea. It offends the world. They hate the idea of judgment. And of course, they hate the idea that they’re going to be judged personally. The very week I was preparing this sermon, I heard a man express this exact sentiment in those exact words. He said, “I hate the idea that I might someday be judged by God.” Exactly like that. This world calls that offensive. They do not want to hear about their sinfulness or need for a Savior. And that’s why those aspects are totally absent from any socially acceptable religion. Socially acceptable religion is innocuous. It’s harmless. It’s inoffensive to our sinful natural sensibilities. It lacks any true basis for morality or condemnation. And they’re fine with that because they don’t want the condemnation.

One theologian diagnosed this socially acceptable religion perfectly when he described it this way. He said, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment for the ministration of a Christ without a cross.” I’ve never heard a better description. And that is why we need the Law. And we need to know how to use it properly. It reveals the need for a Savior. And it never changes or conforms or bends or breaks or flexes or adapts or kowtows or softens or any other word that you can imagine that would imply that God tolerates that which He hates. If it makes you feel bad, then it’s doing its job!

To find comfort from that sadness, flee to Christ. He's the Good News. His work on the cross has solved the problem. We must not forget that a man that thinks he has no sin will certainly never see his need for a cross or for a Savior. Wield the Law lawfully by confronting sin that is being accepted, but be eager to point to the Gospel once it has done its work of crushing pride and arrogance and self-reliance. And remember, always remember, apply it to yourself before anyone else! This principle is not just for calling out the sins that we see in others. It is to keep us on our knees before our Savior.

**III. Salvation is only possible with God.**

It is about the solution to our law-breaking problem. God has come in the flesh to make salvation possible for us. If the Law of God did not make it clear enough already, we’re certainly not going to be able to get through the end of this passage without being explicitly told that man is unable to save himself. So Jesus uses this hyperbolic analogy to reflect the possibility of the rich man being saved.

***25*** *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”*

Now there’s a well-known story, and I heard this when I was young and I believed it for years. There was this small gate in the city walls called “The Eye of the Needle.” And if a camel came with a pack at the end of the day when the gate was already shut, then they had to take off their pack and get down on their knees and crawl through it at night. I don’t know if you’ve heard that or not. I think it’s somewhat popular. And that is said to be the explanation for Jesus’ analogy here. That’s actually a complete myth. That small door did exist, but it was not until medieval times; not in these ancient times when Jesus is talking. So there is no evidence of that being the source of this analogy at all. Besides, Jesus says it’s outright impossible.

***27*** *Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible,*

It’s not just a pain in the neck. It’s not just pretty tough. It’s impossible! And the disciples took it this way as well, reacting in shock.

***26*** *And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”*

Right! Salvation is not simply extremely hard work for us. It is impossible! The Law should already tell us that intrinsically. But here at the end, it’s stated explicitly. You’re never going to do it yourself.

21st Century Americans, us here, are some of the most privileged and well-off human beings not just today in the world, but in all of human history. We are wealthy. It’s said that we live today better than kings in ancient times, with the amenities that we have, even when you’re poor. We are the ones whose salvation is as impossible as a literal camel going through the literal eye of a literal needle. But not just because we do love our possessions. It’s because there’s not a single moral law that we have kept perfectly. We are this rich man. We daily choose temporal pleasure over eternal promises. We are sinners. And with that firmly established, we can close by just marinating in the good news of Christ.

This is the Gospel that the man would have heard if he simply would have responded to Jesus by saying, “ I can’t do that. Have mercy upon me, Lord.” Christ would have told him as He told His astonished disciples afterwards, that salvation is possible with God. Christians are not followers of Christ because we are holier or smarter or better or even necessarily nicer. We follow Christ because He is our only hope. We recognize that we have not and we will not and we cannot be good enough to inherit eternal life. The answer to this man’s question is condemnation. We can’t do it!

I once knew somebody very close to me who on their deathbed was weeping because they were worried that they would be good enough for heaven. And it broke my heart that they missed some of the core message; that it wasn’t given to them clearly. Of course you’re not good enough. That’s the whole point! That is why Jesus came to be good for us. You are not good enough! The Law proves this and it’s never going to change to accommodate our sin. No matter how politically and incorrect it is, the Law does not care. But this is why it pairs so well with the Good News of the Gospel.

Only God is good and therefore, only Christ has lived a life good enough to merit salvation. He has been perfect and His perfect law-keeping is offered to us. His righteousness can be granted to anyone who will call on the name of the Lord to be saved. (Romans 10:13) All who will repent of their sin, forsake their own righteousness, their own law-keeping, trust in Christ to pay for their sins, and keep the law on their behalf, all of them will inherit eternal life. His righteous law-keeping will be imputed to you just as if you had done it yourself. You will get the reward of eternal life because of what He has already done. He will come to your desert island. He will load you into that helicopter, and He’ll fly you home. You will not do any of it yourself. Even your faith to believe is a gift. Jesus doesn’t need our help in salvation. We don’t need to add anything to His work. He'll take care of everything Himself. There is no better news in this world. Yes, the Law is bad news, and yes, it can hurt. Even when it’s used lawfully, it can hurt to break us and to reveal our sin. It can hurt to give that message. But rejoice that it tells you the truth. That is reveals to us a reality about our brokenness and our sin.

Inconvenient and painful truths are better known than ignored because ignorance will just blind you to the coming destruction. Don’t be so foolish as to rebuke or turn away from someone that loves you enough to tell you that your sin will damn you to hell! And don’t be so arrogant as to think that you have met God’s standard of holiness in your good deeds. You‘re not even close! Don’t be so stubborn as to refuse to trust in Christ. Come to Him and be saved! Trust in the good Teacher who is God in the flesh, for the sake of your salvation.

And Christians, you can now look at that same Law, the Law that used to condemn you when you were unbelievers. You can look at that Law and you can see how to live your life as a follower of Christ. You can see how to pattern your obedience in a manner that is pleasing to God. It’s not to get saved of course, but because you are saved. Not only does the Law show your need for Christ, but it shows you how to live like Christ.

And there’s certainly more that could be said about the Law’s usefulness, but hopefully you can see how when it’s used lawfully in these two ways, it’s very, very useful. It shows us all our failure and need for Christ. And for believers, it shows us how to behave like Christ. Christ! Christ! Christ! Christ! Everything points to Christ, the measure of all good doctrine! And with that proper understanding of the Law of God, we need not run from it. It no longer taunts us. We need not be embarrassed of it. And we definitely need not look at it to be saved. It’s not there to teach us how to be saved. Look to Christ for salvation! And then join with the Psalmist who wrote

**Psalm 119:97** Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.