



Mark 10:17-31
Fact or Fiction
“Easy Jesus”

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March 23rd, 2025

This is the third Sunday in a series of messages where we are fact-checking what we know/think we know about Jesus: is it fact, or is it fiction? And this morning I want to address the idea that a lot of people believe: that following Jesus is “easy.” Whether we consciously think following Jesus is easy or not, the idea is quite prevalent. So, what does Jesus himself have to say about this?

And we’re looking at a conversation that Jesus has with a man who approaches him with a spiritual question, and then the conversation turns into a teaching moment by Jesus to a crowd of his disciples, and it opens the door to this conversation about following Jesus and whether it’s easy or not. So, we are in Mark 10, beginning in verse 17 this morning. This is God’s word to you and me today (**Mark 10:17-20**)...

So: In the Gospels, most people who address Jesus with the word “rabbi” – which means “teacher” – didn’t modify it with any adjectives. Last week, we saw some guys in Matthew 22 call him teacher, and then butter him up by saying “we know you are true and teach the way of God truthfully...” so that gets close...but what we read today is the only time someone calls him “good teacher” or anything else along these lines.

And Jesus responds to that, first. “Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.” This isn’t a denial of him as God come to us in the flesh as if the man is wrong about Jesus being a good teacher. Instead: **He’s inviting the man to think deeply about what he was implying; Does he fully understand the truth of what he’s saying in calling Jesus “good?”**

Then Jesus answers the man’s question. The question was, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” His underlying assumption about how he gets to eternal life is exactly the way most people think: that we have to do something in order to “get into heaven.” Depending on who’s research you look at, somewhere between about 70% and 75% of Americans believe that

there is such a thing as heaven. 20 years ago or so, it was more like 85-90%. So, it's come down, but still a significant majority who believe heaven is real.

And most of those people believe that heaven is reached by what you do in this life, with the emphasis on being a good person with good morals and ethics. Even a lot of Christians believe this – either consciously or subconsciously. And in a certain way, Jesus actually affirms that in his response. He rattles off several of the 10 Commandments as part of the answer, but it's not a direct quote of them. It's more of a synopsis of them. For instance, “you shall not defraud” is not one of the 10 Commandments, but is related to not giving false testimony and not stealing, two that he does list.

So, Jesus lists these things. The man replies, “Teacher (dropped the “good” by the way...not going there again), I've kept all those since I was a boy.” **Notice, at this point, even though he's done all these things *he still questions if he's done enough.*** It would be really interesting to know the tone of his voice and the body language here. Does he say this with pride? Does he say it hesitatingly? Does he say it with sort of a quiet confidence that is undergirded by humility? Probably, if he's really honest he'd admit that he hasn't been totally 100% perfect in keeping all of them...who has, right? That's why he asks Jesus the question to begin with: He's not sure he's been good enough. But generally speaking, he's been a good, moral person, and even if he's slipped occasionally, it has always been his heart's desire to live rightly...I suspect his statement about keeping the commands since he was a boy was said not with pride but with humility...and he has an honest sense that it's still not enough. He's coming up short and realizing the difficulty of living a life that is good enough to be in the eternal presence of a holy God.

And this is the problem with working our way to heaven: when do you know if you've done enough? No one has kept *all* of these 100%. Heck, probably no one has kept *any* of them 100%, especially when you consider that in the Sermon on the Mount and in other places, Jesus raises the bar on a lot of these. Like adultery isn't just how we normally define it. Jesus says lust is adultery, and who hasn't looked at someone with lust in their hearts? Or if

it wasn't *someone* you looked, then it was *something* – and so maybe you're not lusting, but you're coveting. The point is: what is good enough? Because the standard is "thou shalt not". It's crystal clear. So, one slip and you're barred from heaven? Then, no one's getting in, right? Or, we're hoping that God is gracious and forgiving and will let us in to this place of eternal life in spite of our flaws in this life. But this guy isn't sure God is that gracious. He's having some doubts. So, what does it take to have eternal life? Let's keep reading to see where this goes (**Mark 10:21-22**).

Jesus looked at him and loved him. If you're reading in your own Bible, I want to encourage you to underline that or highlight it, especially the "loved him" part. How would someone know that Jesus loved him just by how he looked at him? Most Biblical scholars, going back to the early church father Irenaeus in 180 A.D., believe that the Gospel According to Mark was written by John Mark, a close companion of Peter's and some of the other apostles. We see him in Acts, and also 1 Peter 5:13 refers to him as Peter's "spiritual son." And the belief is that John Mark wrote the gospel based on Peter's eyewitness account of Jesus. It's like Peter's memoir of being with Jesus. Regardless: *someone* was there who could see in Jesus' countenance, and sense in his voice, that Jesus loved this man at this moment.

This is super-important to highlight, because it impacts how we read the rest of what Jesus says to this guy: Jesus' next statement to this man is said in love. Not hatefully. Not in condemnation. Not judgmentally. In love. And this man lacks something. He loves his money and his wealth too much. **He needs to remove his love for that stuff, and then he will have treasure in heaven. And then one final step Jesus tells him, "Come, follow me."**

You know, typically, we think of the "come follow me" invitation from Jesus coming first. But there's usually something that God does in a person's life that draws them to Jesus. It's a heart-thing that we see in Scripture and in our own lives where we realize the depth of our sin – maybe a particular sin, maybe sin in general – and we understand that we can't get past it on our own, and we need Jesus. That's exactly what he's doing here. **Jesus is addressing this guy's love for money and stuff because it's the obstacle in his life to following Jesus and eternal life.** There are other wealthy people

who follow Jesus and he doesn't tell them this same thing. There was something going on in this guy's life in particular, connected to his wealth, that Jesus wants to address. And the guy confirms that with his response – he is bummed out at the notion of selling everything and giving the money to the poor, and turns away from Jesus rather than following him.

Let's finish out the passage and then we'll finish out the sermon (**Mark 10:23-31**). So, Jesus uses this as a teaching moment to the disciples who are standing nearby. And while he addresses wealth at first, he broadens it to other things that can get in the way of following him: loved ones in our lives as well as property. We could certainly broaden it to other things as well. I took a brief break for a bite to eat just after writing that sentence, and while eating took a couple minutes to scroll through social media, and this statement came up in a post: "My wife and I decided we don't want children. It was a difficult decision, but we're telling them tonight." I realize that for some people that may not be all that funny, but I did think it was timely, given that I read it as I was writing this part of the sermon. But abandoning our families to follow Jesus is not what he means. And if you've ever been abandoned by your family, you need to know that you have a Father in heaven who loves you perfectly as his son or daughter and he invites you to know him as your father through faith in Jesus. And you've got a bunch of spiritual brothers and sisters in the Church.

What Jesus means is that following him is the most important thing in your life. Following the 10 commandments and other Biblical and ethical and moral things is great. We should do that. Also: love your family. Bless them. Care for them. And other stuff too: Have a job. Have money. Take vacations. Have fun in life. Have a house, a car, a television, a bicycle, or other fun possessions. Learn to paint or play the violin. Go hiking. Root for sports teams. Read books. But don't make that stuff the things by which you measure your relationship with God, and don't let any of it become the things for which you primarily live and find your sense of worth and value and your identity. Jesus is where we find our identity, and Jesus is who we first live for. It's why we want to follow him. We find our identity, our true sense of "self" in him. Everything else is under the Lordship of Jesus when we follow him.

And that's where following Jesus is anything but easy. To say that following Jesus is easy is a fallacy. To be honest, for a lot of Christians, the belief that following Jesus is easy is probably even rooted in Scripture, which is why we believe it's true. So many verses and passages – Old Testament, New Testament whether it's Jesus' teaching or something from Paul or one of the other writers – so much of it emphasizes faith and belief and trusting God, and it's contrasted with works. Righteousness through faith is good; righteousness through works is bad. Believe in Jesus, and that is enough, because Jesus has done the work on the cross and now He's resurrected. Believe, and have eternal life. Easy-peasy. That's the message we internalize.

But the invitation by Jesus to this guy is a 180 degree turn from loving money and stuff by selling all he has and giving the money to the poor, and then to "follow me." And so what we see is that following Jesus is not easy. It's not just "believe" and you're all set. It's "leave the stuff that's coming between you and me, and then follow me." And following Jesus means living as he lived, doing what he did, and valuing what he valued. For instance, in John 14:15, Jesus says, **"If you love me, you'll obey my commands" (John 14:15).** The invitation to follow him, on another occasion is, "If anyone would follow after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Following Jesus is not easy because of this obedience piece – denying ourselves, and then following him. I have a very brief video clip that I took a couple years ago and want to share with you about obedience. **Video Here.**

(Sermon slide) Waverly knows the word "drop." She knows what it means. But she wasn't obedient. She frequently is not obedient, quite frankly. Our dog needs to repent of her love for tennis balls, and increase her love for me as demonstrated by her obedience. She needs to deny herself and follow me. Now, her lack of obedience doesn't mean I don't love her...or that my family doesn't. We love that dog. And believe me, there's lots of stuff where she's been disobedient – she's chewed up two or three gloves, she's chewed a couple of holes in one of our carpets, she's chewed up some plastic toys. But we still love her, even if we keep admonishing her to be more obedient.

And it's the same with Jesus and us. Just as he loved this guy who came to him, and that love led Jesus to confront the guy's sin...Just the same: **Jesus loves you as well, even as he confronts the sin in each of our lives; he invites you to be obedient to him. And that's not easy.** Yes, Jesus has done the truly hard work on the cross of taking the punishment for our sin; and so we are invited to repent of our sin – to turn away from it, and follow him. Where we mess up and fall short – like the guy in the passage – where that happens: God is gracious. God does forgive. People who think “being good” is enough for eternal life but aren't sure if they're good enough and are counting on God to be forgiving for their shortcomings aren't far from the truth. We just need to realize that God's forgiveness and grace comes to us through Jesus and the work he did on the cross.

So, the hard step of obedience that leads to eternal life is two-fold: First, turning away (repentance) from things we love more than Jesus; Second: the step of not just believing and trusting Jesus, but actually following him. He doesn't use the word “repent” with the guy here today, but that's what he's describing. Repent literally means, “turn away from” and that's the invitation here. Turn away from the money and stuff and instead turn and follow Jesus. Make him lord of your life. Make him first above everything else. And all of that, put together, is hard. It is not easy. Following Jesus is a challenge to our identities, our desires, and our loves. But we're invited by Jesus to do this, because he loves us. Just as he looked at this guy with love and gave him this challenging word, so it is with you and me.

As hard as it is to do: let's let go of whatever it might be that is hindering us from following Jesus, and follow him alone. It might be something that is out-right sinful – greed, lust, unforgiveness, indifference toward others and so forth – or it might be something that is more neutral or even good but we've made an idol of it – families, property, possessions, careers, hobbies, and more. Whatever it is: Let's turn from that and follow Jesus. It's not easy, like a camel going through the eye of a needle as Jesus says today. Jesus never promises that following him will be easy. But with God, all things are possible. And following Jesus is the only way to eternal life. Trying to be “good enough” will never get you there, because we simply can't be good enough.

Maybe you've been like the guy in this conversation and tried to do stuff to earn your way to eternal life. All our efforts will come up short, as they did for this guy. We need the forgiveness and grace of God – and he's shown himself to be gracious and forgiving in Jesus. So, instead of trying to be good enough, follow Jesus, because he *is* good enough. That's his invitation to you, because discipleship him is what leads to eternal life. And that is worth the hard work of following him. Let's pray...Amen.