

Discovering Possibilities

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, for a little while this evening I want to go back, as I've said to that same theme about identity in Christ and some of what that means, and this is the last of this short series on that. And we're looking tonight at discovering possibilities. When our identity is in Jesus Christ, when we recognise that, there are possibilities for us that come through it. As we look at this passage this evening, I'm going to try and use the screen as well this evening and see how that works. Great, it works. I hope I can remember to change it at the appropriate time. But the reality is that our identity is always going to shape our thinking, isn't it? Where are, you know, just think about that this evening for yourselves, where your identity is, that's going to shape your thinking and your acting. If your identity is in your nationality, or your intelligence, or in your beauty, or in your career, or in your sexuality, whatever your identity is in, that's what will shape a lot of your thinking and shape a lot of your acting and living. And what we've been looking at is seeking your identity, recognising your identity to be in Christ. We've seen that communication wise and prayer, that we have this relationship with them. And also, as we're in partnership with them, we looked at that last week. And today, I want us just to think about some of the possibilities that we have to think differently because of our identities in Jesus

Christ. But when we become Christians, we're being encouraged to think like God. And so it's a different way of thinking. It's a big, big change to think God thoughts, in other words, to think as it were, looking at life from God's perspective. And that's a challenge for us because it's different, isn't it? We are bound so much of the time by our own hidebound thinking and our own humanity. And we're being asked, God asks us again and again to change your thinking so that we consider some of the possibilities of belonging to Him and what it means. And that's what is happening very, this is a great passage, particularly the section about the rich ruler. It's a tremendous interaction between Jesus and this rich ruler.

Jesus is a great psychologist, psychiatrist, whatever else you want to call him, in his dealings here. And it is great insight, obviously as God, great insight as he speaks to this ruler. And what we're going to try and pick out tonight, and I hope you'll concentrate with me and pull it with me, going to pick out some of the very deep-seated human thinking that this rich ruler displays. And then look at the way God disassembles that and breaks it down and makes him think, in fact, he actually makes him sad. He goes away sad. But he makes him think about some of the kind of the human thinking that he has in his life. And we're all, we all have that same tendency to think the same way as the rich ruler and the crowd who were around Jesus, the philosophy of life that he had that comes across. Okay? There's a few things that are deep-seated human ways of thinking that come across. And I mean by that human ways of thinking without God in the picture that we have in our lives. And the first is that nothing in life is free. You know, a certain ruler asked him, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? He thinks that he's got to do something, he's got to earn his way to heaven, that there's nothing that's going to be free, and he's looking to pay something or to do something in order for him to be accepted by God. You know, it's about deserving something because of what we do and that people work a lot of their lives trying to deserve God's favour, don't they? Because they think nothing, that's what we think, nothing is life, nothing in life is free. You get something through the post and say, you've won £10,000, you think, no, you haven't, there's nothing in life for free. You're immediately cynical. We're immediately cynical when someone says, I'm going to give you £50,000 by just signing this disclaimer for your house or something.

You know, and you recognise there's always, there's always small print. We don't believe, naturally we don't believe anything in life is free. We do have that philosophy of quid pro quo, don't we? This for that. If I give you something, you give me something in return.

And we want to do that with God as well. We'll say certain things and do certain things in order for God to be our debtor, to be the one who needs to give us something, needs to give us his blessing. We've done, we do it all the time. It's deep seated thinking, I do it all the time as a Christian. I think if I live, if I have a good week, and I think God owes me something, and he's going to be nice to me, because we've got this kind of bizarre thinking about quid pro quo and about nothing in life is free and that we have, we're in a par with God and we can earn something from him. God, you know, a famous statement, God helps those who help themselves. That's what we think. God helps those who help themselves.

[5 : 59] It's deep seated human thinking and the rich ruler is looking, he has this kind of human thinking where he says, if I can do something to earn my way to go, pleasure with God then, our favour with God, then I want to find out what it is.

Ah, did I go on to goodness is important. Okay, that's another deep seated human thinking. Now, I'm not saying that's bad. But goodness is important to human beings. I was speaking to someone this week who was arguing about not being a Christian and they just said that they believe that if they do as good as they can, then God will accept that from them. And that's a very common way of thinking, isn't it, for us. And that's what the ruler himself thought. He speaks to God or speaks to Jesus and he says that he's kept the commandments since he was a boy. Now, it's interesting and I'm going to come back to this and I wonder if you noticed this, Jesus lists the commands that very often we think are the commands that will make us good with God. Now, I'll come back to that because it's not the ten commandments, is it? It's only some of them. It's not all of them, just one or two, or five or six. And these are the kind of commands that we think if we keep them, then that's what goodness is about. And we can keep them outwardly, can't we? As long as we don't commit adultery and don't murder, don't steal, don't lie, if we honor our parents, these are good things. They're outward things and they're visible things and they're good things. And sometimes even we can compare ourselves with others and see ourselves as good in comparison with others. And that's really good and important. The crowd themselves, you know, when Jesus talks about the rich man not being able to get into heaven because it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, they say, then, well, who in the earth is going to be saved if this good guy can't be saved? He's outwardly keeping all the commands. If he can't be saved, then who is going to be saved? And goodness is very important in our thinking. I'll just leave it at that. And this is connected to the last point, is that

God will accept me if I do my very best. All these, the rich ruler says, I have kept since I was a boy. And, you know, we simply make that statement. We think that as long as we do our best, God will accept us. And it's all about us. It's all about how we compare with other people. It's all about an outward standard of living. And many people think in this way. And I think often it comes into our own thinking as Christians. But the truth is left outside when we think like that. These are deep seated. They are ingrained in our lives and our thinking, these kind of attitudes. But what I love about this passage is that Jesus challenges all of these things. What does Jesus think? If our identity is in Christ, if we're redeemed by Jesus, if we're Christians, then surely we must be listening to what Jesus says, what he says here, and what he says about our thinking, which must be different from the thinking that we are born with and thinking that so naturally is part of our lives. It's a great passage because what happens here, Jesus blasts human stereotypes.

He rattles the glib assumptions that people and that the rich man and that the crowd were sometimes making. And he challenges the wrong thinking that we have. He's provocative here, but he's also very simple. And he's provoking us to think about our own lives and our own attitudes and our own understanding of our identity in Christ and the possibilities that arise from that. And he does so initially by asking a question about goodness. We talked about goodness. And he says, why do you call me good? Now that's a double edged question.

Do you think he was denying his divinity by asking that question? Why do you call me good? There's no one good, he says, except God alone. Is he saying he's not good, that he's not God, that only God is good? Well, he's kind of saying all of that. He's saying that God is good, but I think he's also challenging the ruler by saying, well, if you call me good, you're right, because I am good, because I am God. And so there's a kind of double edged challenge there. But what he is saying in terms of that statement, he's reminding us that we don't find our goodness in just what we do and what we try to be and our uprightness or our keeping of the commandments. We need to source and recognize goodness in one place only. There's only one perfectly good person and being, and that is God. He's right. Jesus is right. He says no one is good except God alone. That's a hugely important statement because it breaks everyone who says that God will accept them simply because they've tried their best and they're good. There's no one good except God alone, therefore we can't know our relationship with them unless we have our sins and our failures and our faults dealt with before God. The core of our identity as Christians is that we've recognized we need God's goodness to come and to enter our lives through Jesus Christ and what He's done. But also the core of identity is that the God that we serve is a good God. That's a really significant and important point of the God that we serve as a good God because you might spend a lot of your time and I might spend a lot of my time questioning that and doubting that when things happen in our lives that we struggle with. We question His goodness and therefore we find it hard to identify with Him and to serve Him and to follow Him.

[12 : 46] But until we have an understand that God is good and that whatever happens in our lives, He as a good God loves us, has put us through what we're going through for a reason and will take us through the other side as we trust Him, then it will be difficult for us to identify with Him in our struggles. And that's where many people as Christians will shine most brightly when they identify with the God who is a good God even in the darkness and the badness of their experiences. And that's remarkably revolutionary that you can say even though He's slimy, yet He's a good God because we know His purposes and we see them in our lives. So He asks a question about goodness. He then also makes a provocative challenge or He makes actually a couple of provocative challenges. One I've mentioned before. I think Jesus very deliberately leaves out some commands here. What commands so you could ask or Jesus could ask unspoken, He could ask that question. What commands have I left out? Well, what commands has He left out? Do you know? Well, if we look at it, He's at least left out the first three, hasn't He? The commands that tell us that there's one God, that we are to have no idols and that we're to serve Him only. We're not to take His name in vain. And He's also left out, hasn't He? The last command about not coveting. That's significant, isn't it? Jesus Christ is in a provocative and unspoken way making a very important challenge that just obeying the moral law with respect to one another, you know, not committing adultery, not murdering, not stealing is fine. But at the heart of the moral law of God is loving God and His Lordship and not putting anything else before God. And that is exactly what the rich ruler didn't recognize. He forgot that first table of the law which said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your will. And He focused on your neighbour as yourself.

So He is really in leaving out these commands, He is making us think about the ruler's heart.

And He's making us realize that goodness is not goodness at all if God is left out of the picture. If we are to understand goodness for ourselves and goodness ultimately, God must be at the core of that in our relationship. We must love Him as well as loving one another.

And that is what the Gospel exposes for us. It exposes that however good and moral and upright and nice we are, no one's denying this was probably one of the nicest guys around. But Jesus was saying that that's not good enough for God because He didn't love God. There was something else at the core of His life and the core of His heart. His identity wasn't in Christ or us wasn't in loving God. His identity, where was it? It was in His riches, wasn't it? Because Jesus exposes that not just by the commands He left out, by the challenge, the spoken challenge that He gave Him, sell all that you have and follow Me. That was exposing the fact that this rich man didn't really love God and His identity wasn't found in God, rather His identity was found in His position, in His morality, in His uprightness, compared with other people and in His wealth. And God,

Jesus knew that. And so expose that with this one question, sell all that you have or one challenge and follow Me. That's not a broad demand by Jesus. The Gospel doesn't say you can only be a Christian if you sell everything that you have and follow Him. This is a very specific situation to one specific person who Jesus could see into His heart and could see that the wealth He had was where His identity lay. That's where His power lay and that's where His freedom as He saw it lay. This isn't about, this is about perspective, it's about priorities. It's where His priorities lay. And Jesus is exposing, and I'm going to say this again, I said it this morning, I'll say it again this evening, Jesus is exposing the danger of wealth. That's counter cultural, sometimes even very counter church.

[18:10] But Jesus is exposing the danger of wealth. In Luke chapter 16, if you flick back a chapter or two to verse 13, Jesus reminds us of that where He says, you cannot serve God and money.

It's exactly the same kind of thing that He's talking about. No servant can serve two masters, you'll hate one and love the other or you'll be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. This guy served money and He loved money and He hated God as a result. He couldn't have these two masters. And Jesus took this subtle and gentle way of exposing that so that He wouldn't be maybe humiliated in front of the crowd but that He would know Himself. And He didn't know Himself, didn't He? He knew exactly Himself that He couldn't follow Jesus. He went away sad. And there are sometimes in our lives that Jesus needs to make us sad. He exposes things in our hearts to you. Your identity is not in Christ. You're putting your trust in something else. Your heart is in love with something else. Something's more important to you than Jesus Christ. And sometimes He takes us to a place of sadness and darkness in order to recognize that. Jesus knew that for this guy and for many other people, wealth not in and of itself but as I said this morning for what it offers and maybe sometimes just for itself, it gives us power, doesn't it?

And influence and freedom and independence and we can be hedonistic, pleasure loving and we can have authority. You know there's no rules for the rich guy, is there? They think they're above often the law sometimes. They can. They can think like that. We've seen that in the banking crisis that many in positions of authority simply felt that they could do what they wanted. That they could earn any amount of money legally or illegally because they were worth it. Because that's where their identity was. And sometimes we find that with those who have their trust and reliance on great wealth. We were speaking the other night with the man who were in a bit of biography of or not the biography but a book that's been written by one of Donald Trump's age or someone that knew him well. And one of the funny things that came across in that public books, public knowledge was that Donald Trump always comes off the golf course with a sub par score. It doesn't matter how many shots he takes, he always gets a birdie or he always gets a low score.

He'll hold the ball in four even though he's taken nine shots because he's the guy and he can write on the scorecard whatever score he wants and no one's going to argue with him. So he goes in and says that was a good round. What did you get? You got 71. In fact he probably took 95 or 120. But you see how it can delude us in many ways to being above the law and to being above challenge. I'm not saying for a moment that money doesn't matter and it's insignificant but it's about priorities. It's about where our hearts are.

It's about where our identity lies. It's about who we are as people in a relationship with Jesus Christ. And Jesus sends this guy away sad. And Jesus says it's really hard with that amazing picture, doesn't it? Lovely picture, humorous picture. Don't try and kind of make it all deep and theological. It's just a humorous picture of a camel which is probably the biggest animal that they would have known going through the eye of a needle. Doesn't go. It's impossible. And Jesus says that's the reality. That's the degree of difficulty in recognizing the idols that are in our heart. But the great thing is, and with that I pull it together a little bit. Hopefully he challenges us to think outside the box in a relationship with Him. He says, although the crowd say, well who in earth can be saved then in response to this picture, Jesus says what is impossible with men is possible with God. And that's how He wants us to think. He wants us to think about the God for whom there are no impossibilities other than sinning and doing wrong Himself. Challenges us to think about the impossibilities that we have in our own hearts and the world outside and the realities that we face and take them to God and trust Him that what we think is impossible and what we think is difficult

[23 : 09] God can deal with and God can overthrow in our hearts and in our lives. You know it's sad that Christians have come to be known as conservative or conventional. I'm not speaking politically here. We shouldn't be known as conventional people. We should be those, if we think like that, if we are simply moralists and I really hate the thought of us simply being moralists, then we've had a spiritual lobotomy. We need to be thinking God thoughts again. We need to start thinking outside the box and recognizing that in our walk of faith when our identity is in Christ the things that we regard as impossible are not necessarily impossible to God, are not impossible to Him and that He has a different way and a different purpose in our lives. And I want to express that particularly in this what I've called a rich man, a rich man's sandwich because you have the story of the rich man here but in Scripture where things are placed are not insignificant and the reason

Jesus says that to him about with God that is impossible or with God is what's impossible with men is possible with God. We have on either side of the story two very significant facts that Jesus speaks about. The crowd say who then can be saved and Jesus immediately after the story speaks to the twelve about the Son of Man going up to Jerusalem to the Gentiles where we mocked on, insulted, spat, flogged, killed and on the third day will rise again. And we have this good God who goes and dies on the cross to destroy death and bring life and immortality to light. That is why what we think is impossible is not impossible because Jesus Christ has done the impossible on our behalf. It goes against everything that we think that the answer to our needs comes from God nailed to a cross.

That's the answer to our needs. That's what we need to start thinking about and place our identity in. And before the story of the rich man he speaks about what is needed in order to become a Christian. And it is to trust in what God has done like a little child.

That's how we enter the kingdom of God. And that is why the rich man went away sad. One because he wouldn't have believed in a God in a cross but also because he hated the idea of being humble enough to have to follow Jesus like a little child. But that's the reality we've entered as Christians. We live this way because of what Christ has done for us and we accept it humbly like little children. And when we find our identity in that Saviour through humility then we begin to think like him. And I would like just to finish by thinking just challenging us to take our impossibilities to him. Ok? Whatever it might be broadening it beyond the situation here. That take our daily impossibilities to him and think of what it means to have our identity in Christ and to be in communion with him and to find him answering our prayers because of who he is. I'm saying let them fly to him. I can't do this. I can't change. You know? Sitting here tonight saying I can't change who I am. I can't change my bad temper. I can't change the lust that I have in my heart. I can't change. It's impossible. And Jesus is saying in him as our identity as him, we are not allowed to have that fatalistic attitude about our character. Don't settle for less.

Don't settle for moralism. For comparative Christianity where you're saying I'm doing alright because I'm better than them or I'm better than her or him and that's enough.

[28 : 05] Not comparative. But recognize that we can change from the inside out because of the Holy Spirit who lives as it's possible. Our deepest dysfunctions can be dealt with by this living God who says all things are possible to him who believes. But sometimes it's that others won't change, isn't it? Maybe we can think we can deal with ourselves but it's other people. People that we really love but who have no spiritual interest and who seem determined not to believe. Determined, you know? Really set in their ways not to believe and you walk away from thinking that they are never going to change. They are never going to believe this gospel of a crucified Jew and a cross and accepting it with childlike faith. They're too intelligent. They're too far up the professional ladder. Their lives are too different. These are barriers that we face all the time. Impossibilities. Others won't change and Jesus says what is impossible for men is possible with God. We can't change them anyway, can we? Believe that it's God's work to change hearts. And if you believe that and if your identity is in Christ according to His Word and the possibilities, then that's what you pray, isn't it? You start praying for people. When was it that you last prayed for the people that you think will never believe that you love and that you witness to and serve? Others won't change. And then sometimes maybe we say situations won't change either.

Our poverty, our financial situation, the frustrations that we face day to day in the workplace, jobs, our unfulfilled dreams, our unrequited love, our ambitions not being met, the tensions we have in the church, the illnesses that we just despise and that haunt us, our loneliness. Lots of things. Maybe it's even things like me, the Christian minister, the theory that he preaches from the pulpit is so different from the practice of my world outside. What does he know? What's it about? The situations that seem impossible. Jesus says, look with His eyes and listen to His way of thinking, which says that our impossibilities are not His impossibilities. And remember, as we do so, that God is no man's debtor.

Jesus says anyone who comes and is left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life. Are you a bit bitter with God thinking of all that you've given up for Him? And you don't seem to be getting anything back. And please recognise this promise that God is no man's debtor and that anything that you have perceived in your life to have given up in order to follow Him. And you do, we do, don't we? We give up lots of things. There's a cost. Then remember that we will receive many, many times more from Him in this life and in life to come as we continue to plug our hearts and our lives into following Jesus Christ and humbly like little children trusting Him. So may it be for us in our lives, we recognise a lot the possibilities of what it means to follow Jesus Christ, rather than banging our heads all the time against the impossibilities that seem to freeze us and stop us from serving Him. And as our identity is in Him, may we begin to walk that road of faith more and more and be encouraged in so doing. Let's pray together. Lord God, we ask and pray that the possibilities of faith would become very real to us as we remember who we are and who we serve and help us to think God thoughts so easy for us to look at our troubles and our Christian lives and our characters just from a human point of view, but help us to look at them from your point of view and remember that you promised to do the impossible things. You promised to change our hearts. You promised to remove idols from our hearts. You promised that you will answer our prayers. You promised that you will give us great things, not in a human way as sometimes we demand, but in your way that you have a deeper and bigger and more powerful aim and purpose for our lives. And may we see that and hold on firmly to you through that. We ask these things in

His precious name. Amen.