

Intro

An obstacle is an object that stands in the way, an object that prevents or hinders something from happening. Road work hinders Gerald and Dottie from getting to Living Waters. Too many horse appointments prevents Sidney from performing home repairs.

When we moved to Louisville, we had too much stuff after living in a home for 9 years. We had no place to put our stuff, even with a storage unit. We used the hallways to store boxes and whatever else we could. Because of these hallway obstacles, we didn't want to call maintenance because the man was large and struggled to get through our hallway. Our boxes impeded Mr. Melvin from getting to our bathroom.

Several obstacles prevented a rich young ruler from obtaining eternal life. There's obstacles to salvation. There's obstacles to spiritual growth.

This morning we see Jesus saying, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them," and then he puts obstacles in the way of a man inquiring about eternal life. What's going on here?

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Children (19:13-15)

Parents were bringing their children to Jesus for laying on of hands and prayer. The disciples objected. Why? Maybe they had somewhere to be? Maybe they wanted Jesus' attention?

Whatever the case, Jesus rebuked his disciples: "*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven*" (19:14). Remember, children are a model for faith (Matt 18:1-4). Those with childlike faith (e.g., dependence, submissiveness) are heirs of the kingdom. Jesus says, don't be an obstacle that prevents children from coming to me, because those with faith like a child are heirs of the kingdom.

Point 1: The obstacle of self-righteousness (19:16-20)

Explanation

The first obstacle to following Jesus is self-righteousness.

Self-righteousness: the belief that I can merit eternal life or favor with God through my behavior...this often gives birth to pride...I'm so much better than those people...I don't need to be rescued by my sins...I don't really need God!

Self-righteousness = trusting in myself instead of God.

A rich young ruler approaches Jesus with a question: *"Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life"* (19:16)?

Rich young ruler: "had great possessions" (19:22); young (19:20); ruler (Luke 18:18)

- eternal life = admittance into that future kingdom of God where, after Jesus returns, the righteous will be resurrected to immortal, sinless bodies, the physical earth will be transformed and the curse will end, and God will dwell with his people forevermore...eternal life is the inheritance of believers
- eternal life = something we experience today through being born again = a new heart with new desires that's a foretaste of the life to come

Note two things:

- 1) The man thinks a good deed will merit eternal life
- 2) The man isn't certain he has eternal life (uncertainty)...an honest question from a sincere inquirer

Jesus responds, *"Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments"* (19:17). Jesus subtly critiques the man's thinking: *"There is only one who is good."* How can one who isn't good do good and merit eternal life? Jesus tells the man that if he wants eternal life, he needs to keep the commandments.

The man asks, *"Which ones"* (19:18)? The man hopes that he's kept the critical commandments. Jesus lists five of the Ten Commandments: murder, adultery, theft, false witness (lying), and honoring your father and mother. Then he quotes from Leviticus 19:18: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (19:19). Basically, major commandments that summarized the whole Old Testament law.

The man responds, *"All these I have kept. What do I still lack"* (19:20)? This is fascinating. The man believes his good deeds will merit eternal life. Jesus says keeping God's commands is necessary for eternal life. Jesus lists several representative laws. The man is confident he has kept the laws Jesus listed. Yet the man still lacks assurance. He's persuaded good works will earn eternal life. He's persuaded he's lived a life of good works. Yet he's not persuaded he possesses eternal life. By his own understanding he should have assurance. But assurance alludes him.

Application

Coming from a Roman Catholic background, this is exactly what I've encountered talking with relatives and co-workers. They sincerely believed that they could be acceptable to God through good works. At the same time they experienced lack of assurance, because they were uncertain as to whether or not their works were good enough to merit eternal life. I asked them if they would inherit the kingdom. They honestly answered, "I don't know. I can't be certain."

The lesson is this: our works will never provide assurance that we're right with God. This informs our evangelism. When encountering people who are confused because they've been taught that they're saved by the works, we have a sure hope to offer in the gospel. It's possible to know we have eternal life:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. – 1 John 5:13

Self-righteousness is an obstacle to eternal life. Am I trusting in my own deeds for eternal life? Am I lacking in assurance of salvation because I'm trusting in things I've done? Talk to me today if this is you!

Gospel

The gospel is the good news that we can have a cleansed conscience. That we can be assured of God's forgiveness. We've sinned against God. We've failed to keep his law. The law condemns us. It doesn't save us. But on the cross, Jesus died as a substitute for sinners. Taking the punishment for our sins. Jesus calls us to trust in him, not ourselves.

Self-righteousness is a problem for Christians. The rich young ruler was self-righteous in that he thought he could attain eternal life through his works. We imitate him when we think we can grow through our own willpower. As if we are not dependent on divine enablement. As if we don't remain in need of God to change our hearts. In thinking we can change ourselves, we fail to depend on God for spiritual growth. Am I depending on God or myself?

Point 2: The obstacle of inferior loves (19:21-22)

Explanation

The second obstacle to following Jesus is inferior loves.

The man thinks good deeds merit eternal life. The man thinks he's kept God's commandments. He still has doubts. Now Jesus offers certainty:

"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." – 19:21

His response?

When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. – 19:22

Why the demand to give his wealth to the poor? Is Jesus teaching salvation through works (e.g., eternal life earned through generosity)? Why doesn't Jesus answer, "All you need to do is believe"?

Jesus is meeting the man on his own terms. Showing him how he falls short on his own understanding. One, the man has failed to love his neighbor. He refuses to use his wealth to help the poor. Two, the man has placed other gods before Yahweh (Exod 20:3). His god is his wealth, his possessions. These are the things he loves most. Following Jesus pales in comparison to his possessions. He wants eternal life, but he wants his possessions more. His response to God's law reveals his sin, not his righteousness.

The condition Jesus lays out for obtaining eternal life is "*follow me.*" In a roundabout way this is a call to faith. To follow Jesus is to repent. We follow Jesus by turning from sin. In this case turning from indifference to the poor, and turning from worshipping possessions. Turning from love of self to love of neighbor. And repentance is a fruit of faith. We only repent because we first trust Jesus' character and words. For this man, to respond in faith would have been to trust what Jesus said. That his instruction was right and wise and worthy of obedience. That it's better to give away possessions than to worship them. Jesus demands that he be treasured above possessions. This is faith! Following is faith in action.

Jesus is getting at the man's heart. It isn't enough to perform external deeds. Our heart intentions, our loves, matter. Jesus demands serious devotion that stems from trust, not mental agreement with facts. Jesus demands that we worship him more than possessions.

Application

A few comments on wealth. This passage isn't saying:

- 1) It's sin to have wealth
- 2) You can't be wealthy and a Christian

From passages like 1 Timothy 6:17-19 we glean:

- 1) Beware of pride in your wealth
- 2) Before of placing your hope in your wealth
- 3) God provides wealth for our enjoyment (it's okay to enjoy going out to eat or going on cruises or family vacations or snowmobiling)
- 4) God provides wealth so we can share generously

Possessing wealth isn't the man's failure. The man's failure is wealth rules his heart instead of Jesus. Jesus challenged him to reveal his idolatry. What do I want more? Eternal life or possessions?

I resonate with this story. Around April 1998 I was interested in the Christian faith. Around December 1998 I was convinced I needed to follow Jesus. But my love for inferior pleasures stood in the way. I was a member of a college fraternity where partying and drunkenness was my way of life. I loved the social events and the tight friendships. I knew following Jesus would put an end to that way of life. I had to count the cost. What would I choose? Fraternity life or Jesus?

As Christians, inferior loves keep us from following Jesus fully. I don't share my wealth with others because I want to spend my excess on more possessions. I don't read my Bible or pray or serve in the church because I'd rather watch a movie or play on my phone or go fishing. Are inferior loves competing with Jesus? Is my spiritual growth stunted because inferior loves rule my heart? Like the rich young ruler, we can think we're living well while blind to our sin and our inferior loves.

Point 3: God is able to overcome impossible obstacles (19:23-26)

Explanation

God overcomes obstacles like self-righteousness and inferior loves.

It's difficult for rich people to enter the kingdom (19:23) because love of wealth and possessions oppose following Jesus. Jesus provides an illustration: *"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"* (19:24). A camel going through the eye of a needle, the largest animal going through the smallest hole, illustrates the difficulty for a rich person to follow Jesus.

The disciples understand what Jesus is saying, but they're surprised and ask, *"Who then can be saved"* (19:25)? If it's so hard for a rich person to be saved, how could anyone be saved? The Jews believed that wealth was a sign of God's favor. If it's so difficult for those who have been blessed by God, how hard must it be for everyone else?

The point is it's very difficult for rich people to follow Jesus because their hearts are already captured by other things. However, God is able to do the impossible. God is able to save the most hardened sinner. God turns the most unlikely hearts.

Application

Your loved one's heart is held captive by their possessions or their self-righteousness or their belonging to a community of friends that revels in ungodly behavior or ideology. But your loved one's repentance isn't impossible for God!

So pray. Conduct yourselves with mercy, patience, kindness, and godliness in their presence. Engage wisely in gospel conversations. Don't give up. God is able to do the impossible! But he works through means. He uses us to bring sinners to himself.

Point 4: Overcoming the obstacles to following Jesus is worth it (19:27-30)

Explanation

Obstacles to following Jesus include clinging to our self-righteousness or our love of possessions or fears of family disapproval or loss of community (fraternity life). The rich young ruler decided following Jesus wasn't worth it. But what about those who forsake everything for Jesus?

Peter asks, *"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have"* (19:27)?

There's basically three answers:

- 1) In *"the new world"* = the kingdom, the life to come, Jesus' disciples will participate with him in the final judgment
 - 1 Cor 6:2 says, *"Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?"*
- 2) We'll *"receive a hundredfold"* now for everything we've given up for Jesus
 - homes (physical dwelling place = property; the very thing the rich young ruler was unwilling to give up!), family, lands (fields or farmland = physical land one owns = possessions again)
 - the hundredfold comes *"now in this time"* per Mark 10:30 = in this life
 - a hundredfold = unspecified blessing that infinitely outweighs what they've given up
- 3) We'll receive eternal life = entrance into the kingdom of heaven/God

"But many who are first will be last, and the last first." – 19:30

At the final judgment a great role reversal will take place. Those who are first in this life, like the rich young ruler, will be last, because they refuse to follow Jesus. Those who are last, those who lose homes and land because they follow Jesus, will be exalted by God in the life to come. The pattern is Jesus' followers experience lowly status in this life, but honor when Jesus returns.

Conclusion

Looking back, leaving fraternity life was hard. I lost friendships. I lost community. I lost social opportunity. I lost my identity. I had to give up the partying my life revolved around. Things became awkward. Some were angry with my words.

But it was worth it. I found new community, new family wherever I moved through the local church. To DC, back to New Hampshire, to Louisville, to Palermo. The local church always provided built-in community. As a Christian I found acceptance, hope, and forgiveness in Christ. Child of God, follower of Jesus became my identity. I learned new ways of coping with life instead of drugs and alcohol. I learned how to interact with women. God changed my desires and gave wisdom.

There's obstacles to following Jesus. There's obstacles to spiritual growth. There's **the obstacle of self-righteousness**. Do I trust in Jesus or myself? There's **the obstacle of inferior loves**. Is my heart attached to Jesus or other things? What rules my heart? It's impossible to overcome self-righteousness or inferior loves on our own, but **God is able to overcome impossible obstacles**. Don't give up on your unsaved loved ones. **Overcoming the obstacles to following Jesus is worth it.**