



## THE ONE THING

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A report came out this week with the shocking news that flipping upside down and spinning on your head may be hazardous to your health. A new study done in Germany has determined that breakdancing causes a lot of injuries. The vast majority of professional dancers can expect to suffer some major strain or fracture or broken bone while doing it, since it is such a physically demanding activity. And, in case you wouldn't have figured this out, the study shows that the statistics were even worse for the amateurs.

So why do people still do it? Because when it's done right, breakdancing is really COOL! It is so amazing to watch somebody who knows what they're doing. When we went on the mission trip to Mississippi last year, we spent a day in New Orleans and saw some breakdancers putting on a show in Jackson Square. They were amazing. It looked like their bodies were defying the laws of physics as they turned upside down and stood on their hands or heads and spun around. It completely goes against nature, so you can see why there would be risk involved.

If you want to talk real risk, try asking Jesus a question. Because you never know what might happen. A man once came up to him for spiritual advice, and Jesus took his question and taught it how to breakdance. He flipped it upside down and spun it around. He went in directions the person asking had never imagined. The closer I looked at their exchange, the more I was amazed at how Jesus choreographed the whole conversation.

### **Matthew 19:16-26**

*Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"*

If ever there was a wide open door for sharing the gospel message, that sounds like it. "Please tell me how to get to heaven." A lot of times, people came up to Jesus with questions to trick him or catch him saying something wrong. But this man seems completely sincere. He really wants to know: what does it take to get eternal life? As one author I read this week put it, you can almost imagine one of the disciples whispering in Jesus' ear, "Take out the booklet and have him pray the prayer."

But instead of giving a straightforward response, Jesus answers a question with a question.

*"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good."*

Sometimes faith conversations aren't as cut and dry as they initially seem. Author Randy Newman tells the story of talking with a student named Artyum at American University. Artyum was from the Ukraine and interested in philosophy and spirituality. The conversation moved to God, and Randy felt like it would be good to walk him through a small tract he had for explaining who Jesus was. The first point in the tract said, "God loves you and created you to know him personally."

Sounds like a good place to start, right? But before he could get any further, Artyum stopped him and said, "What do you mean when you say the word God? And what do you mean when you say the word love? And, most importantly, how do you know all this is true?" And he wasn't just trying to be difficult – he genuinely wanted to know. What Randy had thought would be a simple presentation immediately changed into a much deeper conversation.

And in our story today, you can bet there's not going to be a simple answer when Jesus starts by dismantling the question itself. The man asked what good thing he could do, and Jesus replied with, "What do you mean by asking me about something *good*? I thought only God was good."

What is this all about? Jesus recognizes that even this man's question reveals a lot about what he already believes. So Christ starts by working to unearth and expose some assumptions this man had that he probably wasn't even aware of. The first one he turned upside down here is what the man saw as **the source of good**.

Now I don't know if he would articulate it this way, but the man's underlying beliefs seem to be:

1. I have the internal capacity to generate good.
2. The good I generate is something God wants or needs.

Let's say for a minute that it's the morning of my birthday, and one of my kids comes to me and says, "Hey Dad. I'd really like to get you a present for your birthday. I know just what you need. You're going to love it. Can I have \$50 to get it?"

Later that day, when we sit down to dinner, they hand me a gift bag. I open it, and inside is \$3. And they say, "Do you just love it? I know how you were saying you were short on cash so I thought this would be perfect. There would have been more, but I had to buy the gift bag and tissue paper and card. And we had to stop for gas on the way to the store, and then I got really hungry so we bought lunch. Anyway, happy birthday."

What's wrong with that scenario? Well lots of things, but what I think it highlights first is the fact that **we take full credit for what didn't come from us**. Just like one of my

kids needed to borrow money from me, we get any goodness we have from God. We don't have the resources to create it on our own. So we can't act like whatever good we're coming up with started with us in the first place. Good is from God, not to him.

Now you might say, "Wait a minute – there are a lot of people who don't believe in God who do good things." And that's absolutely right. But it is because men and women were created in the image of God. He designed us to have a built-in hunger for justice, peace and love. And just because someone doesn't acknowledge God doesn't mean the good in them isn't from him. He's the ultimate source.

But back to my birthday party. The second problem this little illustration shows is that **we expect reverse gratitude**. Instead of my kids feeling grateful for the loan, they fully expected me to be the grateful one, as if it had somehow done me good to lose that \$47. And this is the real danger in the way we approach goodness. If we think we're the source, we can somehow twist it around in our heads and think that we are doing God a favor with our behavior. Instead of us being grateful for what God has given us, we expect God to show us the gratitude and reward us for our goodness. He owes us.

I've always liked what John Barbour once said: "God gave you your gifts. He's not impressed by them."

Now those of you who have grown up listening to sermons probably have the message memorized by now that God doesn't save us because of our works. You know that one. But how about this: have you ever secretly felt like God should be impressed by something good you did for him? I know I've felt that way before. I wouldn't say he owes me eternal life, but I might feel like I deserve a little slack getting through this life. We can sometimes develop a sense of entitlement, thinking we've been good enough to deserve God's special treatment. That's reverse gratitude, because no matter how great our accomplishments we bring to him, he's still the one who gave us the \$50 in the first place.

### **James 1:17**

*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

It's not that God doesn't care when we give him something. He loves it. We just can't fool ourselves into thinking we're supplying something he lacks. He's the only producer of good in the universe.

Jesus takes a moment to draw attention to that fact, then does proceed to give the man a more direct answer.

*"If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."*

Now you may have noticed that Jesus' didn't exactly repeat what the man asked. He didn't ask how to "enter life" – he asked how to "get eternal life." Maybe that sounds

like the same difference. I believe Jesus was making an intentional, yet subtle distinction to reshape what this man saw as **the substance of life**.

We learn later on in our story that this man was really rich. We're told he had great wealth. The Greek word Matthew uses for "had" is "echo", which means to hold on to, like grabbing something in your hands. And when this man talks about "getting" eternal life, it's the same root word. He wants it in his hand, like one of his many possessions. It is a thing to be obtained. How can I get my hands on eternal life? I want to own it.

Who here can palm a basketball? I always thought it would be cool to be able to do that. Since I'm terrible at actually PLAYING the sport, it would be nice to have one trick that I can do with the ball to show my mad skills. But my hands just aren't quite big enough for the job. A baseball works great. Even a soccer ball is doable. But my fingers won't wrap far enough around a basketball.

To hold something in your hand implies that your hand is large enough to be in charge of that something. When it is within your grasp, you're the bigger party. You're the one in charge.

So Jesus' different word choice stands out when he says "if you want to ENTER life." Because to enter a place, you need to be smaller than it. Now you're the thing being held. This is another case of Jesus flipping the conversation on its head. Instead of us getting a hold of eternal life, having it in hand, eternal life is getting a hold of us. That puts our relationship to it in an entirely different light.

When the Seattle Sounders had their very first game, it was incredibly difficult to find an individual ticket. Officially, they were only selling season tickets. You couldn't just buy a seat at that particular game.

Let's say you're really determined to get one. So you go online and scour ebay and Craig's list, ready to pay a premium. Nothing. You come up empty-handed. But you're obsessed with getting a ticket to that game, so the day of the game, you finally drive up outside Qwest Field and five minutes before the start, you find a scalper who is more than happy to part with a ticket for a crazy price.

You're ecstatic. You got exactly what you wanted. So you turn around and go home and hang the ticket on your wall.

That wouldn't be right. Because the ticket wasn't ultimately the dream – the experience is what you were really after, the chance to be part of history, to share in the excitement of the moment, to cheer and yell and sit in the stadium with 30,000 fans who are equally as pumped up.

Jesus essentially tells this man, "It's not about holding a ticket to heaven. It's not about a destination – it's about entering life. I'm inviting you into my house. Don't think of it as

something you own and hold onto – think of it as something you experience and take part in.”

Another change Jesus made to the man’s question was that he dropped out the word “eternal. Jesus just talked about entering life. Again – it looks like a minor word change, but it lets us see how Jesus viewed salvation.

Eternal is a “forever after” word. We think of that as meaning we’ll go to heaven after we die, and that makes salvation sound like it’s off in the future. In Christ’s mind, salvation was already on the scene. There’s definitely a fantastic hope out ahead of us, “the goal of our faith” as Peter calls it, but we start living eternal life in the present, not the future.

Jesus talked about it in terms of God’s kingdom, and this is what he preached:

**Mark 1:15**

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.*

When Christ came, God’s ever-after domain broke into our time-bound world and staked a claim. It was the inauguration of a new order. A spiritual shift took place and eternal life became accessible in the present tense. The Apostle John wrote and said about Jesus, “In him was life,” -- Christ himself IS the life we’re seeking. We can live as part of God’s kingdom here and now – we don’t have to wait to get to heaven for that to begin.

We’re going to be talking about this more in a few weeks as we explore what God’s kingdom looks like and what it means to be living in light of that here on earth. But here’s a quick list of some eternal life kinds of things that are offered to us on earth through Jesus:

1. I have full access to God. (Ephesians 2:18)
2. I have worth and purpose. (Matthew 10:29-31)
3. I have love and forgiveness. (John 16:27)
4. I have authority to challenge darkness. (Luke 10:19)
5. I have the Holy Spirit guiding me. (John 16:13)
6. I have God’s people all around me. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

That is what eternal life is all about, and it’s not off in the distance – it’s right here.

Jesus tells the man that the best way to experience some of that heaven on earth is in living by kingdom values now. He tells him to obey the commandments. As we follow God’s laws, we discover an amazing secret: God didn’t make the rules to ruin our fun. His commands are brilliantly designed to be for our best, to help us live out the best life. As the Psalm writer discovered,

**Psalm 119:92-93**

*If your law had not been my delight,*

*I would have perished in my affliction.  
I will never forget your precepts,  
for by them you have preserved my life.*

I was talking with somebody this week about how obviously damaging sin is – when its other people’s sin. I see so many situations where it is crystal clear to me as an outsider that when we walk away from God’s laws, we’re only hurting ourselves.

But it’s never quite as plain when it’s my own struggle. I can rationalize all kinds of bad behavior and resent the restrictive rules God has in place. But his law is life. His commands are there to keep us from our own destructive patterns. And they usher in the eternal qualities we long for.

The man in this encounter isn’t fighting against that idea at all. He’s ready to be compliant. He just wants some more direction

*"Which ones?" the man inquired.*

*Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

*"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"*

That’s a pretty bold statement, claiming to have kept all the laws. Particularly the one about loving your neighbor as yourself. Who does that all the time? But even if the man genuinely thought he had lived up to all those things, he still knew something was missing. What do I still lack? Following the rules had not been fulfilling. He has this nagging sense there had to be more.

When Mark tells the story, he says at this point,

**Mark 10:21**

*Jesus looked at him and loved him.*

Christ felt such affection for this man. Jesus looked at him and loved him – a guy obviously burdened with a heavy load. Jesus looked at him and loved him -- a young man earnestly wanting to do the right thing. Jesus looked at him and loved him – knowing he wasn’t going to be able to handle the next thing Jesus was about to say.

*Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

*When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

This makes a really great text if you want to talk to people about giving money. Don't be that rich guy who was too attached to his bank account. Store up some treasures for yourself in heaven instead of on earth.

It's easy to see why – money is all over in the story. And God does want us to be generous and have our priorities in the right place. But I'm not convinced this is the passage to use for that message, because I don't believe that's what Jesus was trying to get at. I think he is driving home **the scope of impossible**.

Typically, if you ask people what the moral of this story is, they will say it's that we can't love anything more than Jesus, and if we do we should get rid of it. I don't argue with that idea, but I don't think that was what Jesus was saying. I think he was looking for the one thing the man **COULDN'T** bring himself to part with. I think Jesus knew this would be his breaking point. Why? Because the man thought if he did **EVERYTHING** right, eternal life would be his. And the whole point of needing grace is to reach the realization that we can't do everything right.

Suppose for a minute that he had gone away and had a big garage sale and sold off every last bit of earthly goods he owned. What would he have done? He would have come back to Jesus and said, "Okay I did that. Now what?" He would have stayed in that mode of believing he could get eternal life if he just kept working at it. There was nothing out of his reach.

That's why I think Jesus chose the one thing -- the one thing this man couldn't bear to part with. Jesus loved him enough to bring to light the lie he had been living – that he could earn salvation on his own. It showed him that for all his great behavior, deep down, God didn't have center stage in his heart. There was a wall and he finally hit it.

For each of us there is a wall – the one thing we are incapable of doing or giving up for God on our own. What's your one thing – the one impossibility that blocks you from reaching God on your own? We've all got something. For some people it's the same as this guy – money. For some people it's family pressure, or a relationship with that girlfriend or boyfriend that seems too important. Maybe the thought of having to walk away from a lifelong habit or sin. Maybe it's your intellect that stands in the way. You just haven't been able to wrap your mind around all the questions you have about God, and your doubts seem insurmountable. Lesslie Newbigin says we have this false idea that we are honest seekers, not realizing that without God's help, we're incapable of fully grasping truth on our own

Most of the time, I cruise along like that rich man, thinking that overall I'm doing pretty well by myself. Having Christ to help out is nice and all, but I'm not doing half bad at complying with God's wishes.

That's when Jesus looks at me and loves me and confronts me with the harsh reality: My heart is stuck in the wrong place. And I don't have it in me to change it. If I think I do, then I haven't quite seen myself clearly yet.

I remember one season of my life when I needed to make a major, life changing decision, and I couldn't work it out in my head. For some reason I was completely stuck. I prayed and I prayed, asking God to show me what to do and I would do it. Then one day I was listening to a song by Fred Hammond that told the story of the blind man by the side of the road. He was calling to Jesus, and a line in the chorus said, "Jesus, I need you, please don't pass me by. I know I'm broken, but you can heal me."

And as I heard those words it hit me: my inability to make a decision was a sign of something broken inside me. I had never thought of it that way before. I had always just assumed if I thought about it long enough, I'd figure it out, and I realized in a moment of total clarity that it was far deeper than that. What I was needing was not so much an answer as to what to do – it was to admit I was broken and ask Christ to heal that up in me. I had to reach a point of helplessness, because only then would I understand my own limits.

**Psalm 51:17**

*I learned God-worship  
when my pride was shattered.  
Heart-shattered lives ready for love  
don't for a moment escape God's notice.*

That's the most important truth to come to grips with – that we are helpless. We need to feel and understand the sheer magnitude of the word impossible. We feel badly for the man in this story, but he needed to walk away sad, to live for a while with the weight of what he couldn't do. Only then would he be able to come back to Jesus with better understanding.

The disciples had their own trouble understanding how this worked:

*When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"*

In Jewish culture back in Jesus' day, to have wealth was considered a sign of God's favor on your life. Being rich was synonymous with being blessed. So from the disciples' perspective, if this guy had money, he was probably way more of God's favorite than they were. And if even a favorite couldn't do enough, how could the rest of them possibly expect to have hope?

And then Jesus utters his famous response:

*Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

From a human perspective, it can't be done. There is a threshold none of us can cross.

But...BUT – with God ALL things are possible! This is **the surprise of God.**

We may not be surprised that God is strong. But if all things are possible with him, that means he can change my world, my situation. It erases all the limits that were there before.

In the movie *Bedtime Stories*, Adam Sandler is watching his niece and nephew for a few days, so he tells them a bedtime story every night. The kids begin helping to tell the stories, introducing their own ideas. And whatever they happen to suggest ends up coming true for Adam in real life the next day.

The stories get crazier and more wild, so you think they couldn't possibly come true. Like when one of the kids decides it was raining gumballs in the story, you go, "There's no way that's gonna happen the next day."

But then sure enough, Adam's driving under a bridge, and as soon as he starts coming out from under it, gumballs begin pouring from the sky. The camera pulls back and you see a large candy truck above him had gotten in a wreck and the whole load is dumping over the side of the bridge. And you start to realize how small your imagination is.

It's a silly movie, but it reminded me of how quick I am to dismiss what Christ says about ANYTHING being possible with God – far more fantastic things than gumballs raining from the sky. He is so creative and able to do far more than we ask or imagine. I love how Paul describes him as

**Romans 4:17-18**

*...the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.*

Hope isn't about what we CAN'T do – it's about what God HAS done. On the cross, Jesus gathered up all our questions about eternal life and became the answer to them himself.

Eternity has broken through the barrier between us and God, and Jesus is inviting us into it here and now. The impossible "one thing" in our hearts is now in the realm of the possible. As David wrote,

**Psalms 18:29**

*With your help I can advance against a troop;  
with my God I can scale a wall.*

Let me go back to that student's questions from the beginning. What do we mean by the word God? We mean the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and you and me. We mean the God of surprise endings, the God who speaks worlds into existence, the God who makes us face the darkness in our hearts and STILL looks at us and loves us.

And what do we mean by that love? We mean deep, unconditional love, love that was self-sacrificing in the ultimate way, love that, as the hymn writer says, will not let me go.

And how do we know it's all true? The only way I know to pursue that answer is through a relationship with the one who calls himself the Truth.

**1 John 5:20**

*We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true-even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*

What is the wall in front of you this morning? No sin is too big, no question is too hard, no grief is too great. With Christ, all things are now possible. With Jesus, we see ourselves more clearly and still are loved. With our God, we can scale a wall and enter into the life he has for us today.