

Don't Try This At Home

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who makes all things possible, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

I like the amazing stunts in movies like Mission Impossible and Fast and Furious. I mean who doesn't like watching a guy fighting the bad gut on top of a speeding train? (SLIDE) Those scenes where the good guy jumps from his speeding sports car onto the back of an also speeding semi-trailer and then fights the semi driver for control of the vehicle always have me on the edge of my seat. Those stunt doubles make it seem like they're doing the impossible. I'm sure you've also heard the warning: "Don't try this at home!" Even so, there are always a handful of daredevils who think they can safely copy what they see the professional stuntman do. What usually follows is a clip worth sending into Funniest Home Videos. When I watch those clips sometimes I actually feel pain in the areas where the person in the video gets hurt. I think we call that empathy...

In our Gospel lesson today, we meet a young man who thought he could do the impossible. He thought he could earn his way into heaven. (SLIDE) "Don't try that at home, or anywhere else," says the Holy Spirit to us this morning. Overestimate your goodness, or underestimate your God and you could be in for an eternal world of hurt. The thing about stunts like jumping off a building or hopping between moving cars is that the professionals make it look so easy. When the young man in our text considered God's commands he thought they were easy

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too. So, he approached Jesus looking for approval like a pat on the back. (SLIDE)

In spite of his false presumption there is something likeable about this young man. He isn't coming to Jesus with a trick question, trying to force Jesus into the dilemma of making a false statement about God like so many of the religious leaders had done. Instead, he runs to Jesus and falls on his knees before him out of respect. Still, there's something about this young man we don't want to copy – namely the way he overestimated his own goodness. When Jesus told him he should keep the Commandments, the young man replied with a straight face: “All these I have kept since I was a boy!” Have you ever made a claim like that? Many people do. When I've thought about my turn to knock on the Pearly Gates of Heaven and God asks me why I should be allowed in, the answer I often tell myself is that I've tried to be a good person. I haven't literally killed anyone. I've tried my best to be honest in everything. I've tried to be a good father and a good husband... These responses are really no different than the one the young man gave Jesus. I don't think I'm too different than anyone else in this. We all tend to overestimate our goodness because we underestimate the precision with which God wants all of his commands obeyed. We forget that being good in God's eyes means always responding to hurtful comments with loving words. It means speaking well of your neighbor even when his dog yaps all day long. It means respecting your parents even when they don't let you hang out with your friends. It

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means protecting your neighbor's investment of a new lawn by weeding out all the dandelions in your yard. It even means praying for those who shoot other people at parades or in churches, schools, or any other public place. There is no way we obey God with such precision, and neither had the young man in our text. All have sinned, says the Bible.

So, what was Jesus to do with this young man? You'd think he'd let out an exasperated sigh, roll his eyes, and rip the kid to shreds. That would have been easy for Jesus to do. After all he is God. He knew everything about that young man. He knew about the dirty thoughts the young man had entertained earlier that day about the girl who lived down the street. He knew how the young man was refusing to forgive his father for having beaten him, and how he had scoffed at the seeming silliness of his Church elders. Jesus really could have put the man in his place. Instead, Mark records these astonishing words: "Jesus looked at him and loved him." Wow! Far from being irritated, the way I usually react when someone is slow to catch on to simple directions, Jesus consciously loved the man. How did he show that love? He was honest and authentic with him. Jesus said: "One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Wait. What? Pastor, how was that a demonstration of Jesus' love, you might be thinking to yourself... Like the doctor who orders multiple tests to

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convince a skeptical patient of his illness, Jesus used this command to bring to light the fact that the young man wasn't as good as he thought he was. It was like Jesus used the Law as a mirror to point out what the man was lacking. The man's face fell at Jesus' words. You see, the young man loved his "stuff." It was too much to ask of him to give it up to follow Jesus. He admired Jesus but clearly he didn't love or adore him.

Many of us have come to church this morning because we admire Jesus. Maybe you love his simple yet thought-provoking parables. You like how he stood with those whom others wouldn't touch with a 39 1/2-foot pole. You even know he loves you because he willingly gave up his life on the cross for you. For all these and many more reasons you admire this really great man. In case you didn't know this already, Jesus wants more than your admiration; he wants your adoration. Will you give up everything to follow him, or are you too attached to your worldly possessions? Jesus probably doesn't want you to sell all your belongings and enter a monastery or convent, but he does want you to use all your gifts to praise him. For example, he wants every movie you rent to glorify him, not mock his design for marriage. He wants every meal you eat to be received with thanksgiving, not groans. He wants every note you practice on the piano to be done with cheerful eagerness, not grumpy sluggishness. He wants every dollar given with joy as a sacrifice to show your love of God. If we have really been touched by Jesus' love,

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these won't seem like excessive demands, but exciting opportunities. We serve the King of the universe not because we have to, but because we get to.

Unfortunately, that was all too much for the young man and he slumped away from Jesus much like how you may be slumping in your chair now after hearing what Jesus expects of you. It's actually good for you to feel that way. As Martin Luther once said: "Before God can make us glad he needs to make us sad." While we shouldn't overestimate our goodness neither should we underestimate the power of our God. That's what the disciples were doing. When Jesus watched the young man go, he said: "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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". You might be able to squeeze a whisker or two through, but getting hooves, hump, and rump through the tiny opening, now that's impossible. It's just as impossible for someone to squeeze into heaven while entertaining covetous thoughts because they are not happy with what God has already given to them. It's no wonder the disciples responded: "Who then can be saved?" The disciples may not have owned as much "stuff" as that young man, but they knew they wished they were as rich... Jesus' words apply to you too. A camel has a better chance of fitting through the eye of a needle than any of us has of getting into heaven!

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Earning our own salvation is impossible. We all know that. I mean if each sin was a raindrop, I'd be soaked right now just from the sins I committed since getting up this morning. Like water bursting through a dam, I can't stop the deluge of greedy, dirty, boastful, sarcastic, selfish thoughts that saturate my brain from morning until night. Even so, there is hope for me. Jesus said all things, even the salvation of an incessant sinner like me, are possible with God. It's more than possible, it's guaranteed. Jesus made the impossible a certain guarantee when he gave his life on the cross to pay for all the sins I've committed or will ever commit. He's done the same for you even if you mistakenly think that your sins are worse or not as bad as mine. It's not about our sin; it's about our Savior. Even right now Jesus is looking at you as he looked at that young man in our text and he loves you. He says, "I have forgiven you. My forgiveness covers you like a blanket."

Parachuting from a skyscraper. Running on the roof of a speeding train.

(SLIDE) Please don't try these at home. Leave the crazy stunts to the professionals. The same goes for trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle. It's impossible to do, just like convincing God you're good enough to get into his heaven. It's comforting to know what's impossible for you and me is not even the least bit difficult for God. **(SLIDE)** He accomplished our salvation through Jesus. May you adore Jesus above all else and follow him! Amen.