

Hell's Monkey Trap

The monkey trap is an ridiculously simple, and yet effective trap. It's made of a container, either bolted down or attached to a chain. The container has a hole cut into it wide and thin enough for a monkey to put his hand in when flattened out. Inside the trap is usually a banana, or a sweet. Once the monkey smells the treat, he slips his hands in and grabs the treat, but once his fist is clenched, it is too big to withdraw out of the hole. And believe it or not, many a hunter catches a monkey this way. Because the monkey, once having grabbed the treat, will simply not let go. He will fight and fight to get his hand out of the trap and to perhaps pull the trap from its chain, but all along, he will not think to unclench his fist. That's all he's needs to do to get free, but he doesn't do it.

We shake our heads at the stupidity of those monkeys, but the angels may as well do the same to us. For Hell has its own monkey traps that keep human beings firmly trapped. The thing inside the monkey trap is not a sweet or banana but something more sophisticated, like fame, or fortune, or power, or pleasure. And all that would be needed for a man to escape that trap, and turn to God his Creator would be to release the bait – open his hand, surrender the thing he has grabbed and wanted. If he just did that, he'd be free, and he could turn to God.

But we find human beings by the millions who are trapped by their own clenched fist, by hanging onto things that will keep them from God. For some it is their money; for some it is their position or their reputation; for many, it is their own sense of respectability and morality. They feel they are not bad people, they feel they are upright, ethical, moral people, and they will cling to their own goodness, and righteousness with a fist clenched so tight that the whites of their knuckles are showing.

This account in Mark shows a man, a man just like you and me, who was caught in a monkey trap. He wanted life, but he also wanted what was in the monkey trap.

And as we watch the account of this man, we will see ourselves. We will see an example of the monkey trap. What is it that keeps us from turning to God? We'll see the miracle that it is to turn to God. God alone can unclench that fist, flatten that hand, and get us out. And we'll see the reward, the sweet promise of faith.

I. An Example of the Monkey-Trap

Mark 10:17-31 ⁷ Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. ¹⁹ "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother.' " ²⁰ And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." ²¹ Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." ²² But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Our Lord is on the road to Jerusalem. He is walking to His own death. He knows He will be crucified, and has told His disciples this. But He is not on the run, He is not in hiding, He is not fleeing. He is headed towards the cross. He is modelling for His disciples what discipleship is.

On this road, a potential disciple comes running up to Him. He seems respectful and sincere – he kneels, he calls Jesus, "Good Teacher" and he then asks Jesus the question that every evangelist

wishes to hear: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It's a good question. It's not necessarily wrong to ask this – Acts 16:30, Acts 2:37, John 6:28.

And just about every evangelism book in the world would tell you to take this man through five steps- tell him, you are a sinner, the wages of sin is death, you cannot save yourself, Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, so turn away from your sins and receive Jesus as your Messiah and Lord to forgive you and declare you righteous.

But Jesus does none of that. As always, He surprises us. Instead, He asks the man a strange, ambiguous question, and he then gives him a hard requirement.

The question Jesus asks is odd. “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God.” Now here we have two possibilities. The first possibility is that Jesus is saying that He, too, is a sinner, a fallible man and is distancing himself from God. The second is that he wants this rich young ruler to think about what *good* means. He has just told Jesus that he is good. In Matthew's account, the man says, “What good thing might I do to inherit eternal life?” The man is using this word *good* a lot, but what does he mean? He was using it in a light, throwaway, even patronising sense. People today like to call Jesus a good man, by which they mean Jesus was an excellent specimen of high morals. They do not mean He was perfect or sinless. They just mean He was a great example. Since this man wants to do some good thing (Matthew) to be saved, Jesus need to help Him to understand that this is not goodness as man thinks of it, but goodness as God thinks of it – God's holiness.

Jesus is not denying His identity. We know that in chapter 2, He forgave a man's sins – and how can you forgive sins, if you are a sinner? We know that in chapter 10, He says that He has come to give His life as a ransom for many. How can He be a substitute for my sins, if He has His own? And we know in chapter 14, the High Priest asked Jesus at His trial:

Mark 14:61-62 *"Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."*

Jesus knew who He was, and knew His own sinlessness. But this man did not. This man was using the idea of goodness like many do today. Jesus wants the man to know whose standard of goodness – God's.

And what He does next is to confront the man with God's Law. He quotes six of the ten commandments: do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not bear false witness, honour your father and mother, and then he words the command to not covet slightly differently – do not defraud. He does that for a reason, which will become clear in a moment.

You want to enter eternal life? Strictly speaking – be as good as God is, and you'll enter. Righteous people enter Heaven. It's that simple. If you can perfectly keep God's commands, heart and soul, unbroken from birth to death, theoretically, you could enter Heaven.

That's exactly what this man thinks of himself. “All these things I've kept from my youth,” he says. Really?, we ask. From youth, no stealing, no lying, no dishonouring father and mother? Well, if you use man's standard of goodness, then maybe. But if you use God's standard of goodness, which Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount, then no. There Jesus taught that if you hate someone in your heart, you have already assassinated him, that if you lust after someone in your heart, you have already committed adultery. Who defines good? Man or God? According to man, this man was good, and was ready for Heaven. According to God, he was not, and needed forgiveness.

Jesus is trying to help him to see that. Remember we saw that Jesus worded the command *You shall not covet*, differently? Now we see why. Jesus says to the man, Go, sell all you have, give the proceeds of the sale to the poor, and then come and be my disciple. Die to your old life, come and live.

Jesus loves the man. He looks on him longingly. He wants the man to be saved. Why doesn't Jesus just tell him to believe? Why tell him to go and sell all he has?

Because he had never repented. He had never been broken before God. He was propped up by his material success, and thought that he needed just an extra bit of morality. He had never seen himself as wretched, poor, blind, miserable and naked. And had Jesus said to that heart, just believe, that self-satisfied, self-righteous heart would have agreed and said, Yes, I do! Wonderful! I'm saved. But because Jesus loved him, because Jesus wanted him to be saved, he needed to show the man his disease before he was ready for the cure. He needed to show the man how sick he was so he would be willing to be treated.

The man's response shows where he really was. He was appalled, grieved and sad. He wanted eternal life, but not at that cost. He wanted certainty of his eternal destiny, but not if it meant losing what he had come to lean on, rest on, love. Here was his heart: he had more than one master. His wealth had grown over his heart, he had identified himself with it. He could not come to Christ empty-handed, because covetousness filled him. He was sad, but not sad enough. Grieved, but not grieved enough. He had more than one love, and it is obvious which love won out that day.

He could not receive Christ because his hands were full of something else. He could not be bankrupt before God because he believed he had merit. Ironically, he lacked through what he had. His deficiency was his material fullness that he loved and trusted in. In this man's life, his wealth prevented a full surrender, and a total trust in Christ. He needed to be willing to put it all on the altar, become empty-handed, completely trusting in Christ.

This man's wealth, and his own morality were a monkey trap for him. He couldn't let go of them. He couldn't be broken before God's Law, and let God save him.

What is keeping you back from Jesus Christ? What is it that you are terrified Jesus will tell you to give up, and so you walk away from Him saddened? What is it that is still your real master, and you know you cannot serve two, so you choose the lesser, the easier, the temporal?

This obstacle of our own self-reliance, our own self-righteousness needs to be overcome. That's why Jesus turns to his disciples and explains what has just happened. He explains the miracle that faith is. He explains how we are transformed.

II. An Explanation of The Miraculous Transformation

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ "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." ²⁶ And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁷ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

Jesus says something that was absolutely astonishing to the disciples. Those with great wealth, will

struggle to be saved. Jesus was not eliminating the possibility – showing its unlikelihood.

The reaction: the disciples are astounded. Their theology had taught them the opposite – those blessed in life are righteous and therefore Heaven-Bound. Wealth makes a lot of things easier, surely it makes entering Heaven easier. So Jesus answers their astonishment with emphatic repetition – this time modifying His statement with the word *trusting*. (NKJ & KJV).

That's very significant. The issue is not how much you have. The issue is *where* your trust lies. And the bigger a pile of goods and cash and good deeds that a man has laid up, the less he feels the need to turn wholly to God.

1 Timothy 6:17 *Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.*

We remember the church at Laodicea which was rich and increased with good and had need of nothing – and what was their spiritual state? They were lukewarm, neither hot nor cold and, in fact, Jesus was locked outside their church. Jesus tells them that their self-sufficiency has blinded them to the fact that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked --

We remember the story Jesus told of the wealthy man who made so much that he decided to simply build bigger barns to store more of his stuff. And this was his plan:

¹⁹ *'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." ' '20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' '21 "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."*

It is not the possession of wealth that is sinful; it is the trust in it. It is the way it comes to control us, and trap us until we do not turn to God.

Steve Jobs once said “Sometimes I believe in God, sometimes I don’t. I think it’s 50-50 maybe.

Bill Gates: “The specific elements of Christianity are not something I'm a huge believer in. "Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."

Henry Ford said “I see no use in spending a great deal of time learning about heaven and hell. In my opinion, a man makes his own heaven and hell and carries it around with him. Both of them are states of mind.”

The problem is not the wealth, otherwise God helped Abraham and Solomon to sin. The problem is the clenched fist. Or, as Jesus puts it – the camel humps.

A camel, with its huge bulk, and its humps could sooner be squeezed through the tiny opening of needle than a rich man into the kingdom. The problem is not that we aren't big enough, but that we aren't small enough. The problem is that God's gospel says, strip down to nothing, admit your weakness, your smallness, your sinfulness. We come, like a camel full of water, with our works, our goodness, our deeds.

And again, the disciples are astonished. Because if a rich man, who has money to make life easier cannot make it in, who can make it? . They are still operating on merit principle. All of us are rich in something, how then can we be saved? And in one sentence Jesus gives the Gospel of grace:

With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

The problem is not simply that it is hard for the wealthy, it is hard for everyone, but wealth only makes it more unlikely. Man, trusting in himself, in his own righteousness, in his own wealth, in his own command-keeping cannot enter the kingdom. Man's goodness is not good enough. But God's is. God's goodness can save a man when he repents and receives Christ. God's provision of His own Son is good enough. God's grace does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, when we renounce ourselves, let go of the monkey trap, surrender our idols and lean totally on Christ.

Let's rewind and replay the scene, and imagine it had turned to the man's conversion. Jesus says to him:

One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.

And the man, looks down and up, and tears begin to stream. Jesus, he says, I have not kept the commandments. I have coveted all my life. I did not know it until I was threatened with losing it, but now I see that covetousness sits in my life as a god. Have mercy on me, a sinner! Forgive me, make me clean! I will release and renounce what would keep me from you, be it all my goods! But give me life, for I am dead in my sins.

I venture to say the response, would have been "Today salvation has come to this son of Abraham. Fear not, for there is no one who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time -- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions -- and in the age to come, eternal life."

What holds one man back is his money. What holds another man back is his youth. What holds another back is her beauty and her popularity. What holds another back is his reputation. What holds another back is his independence. Whatever it is, it is that man's monkey trap. If we would just release, come to Christ as he is, surrender, he would be free, forgiven, and made new.

We cannot, but He can. It is impossible for us to save ourselves, or even to give up our idols, but God's grace can. Faith is a miracle. God's grace, which does the impossible, must open our eyes, break the stony heart. It is ours to not resist God. It is ours to not harden our hearts, not deafen ourselves to His call. But apart from Him, it is impossible.

God can unclench the fist, God can release the grip. If you are terrified that coming to Christ is nothing but pure loss, Jesus has some words of comfort for you.

III. An Expectation of the Multiplied Treasures

Then Peter began to say to Him:

"See, we have left all and followed You." ²⁹ So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, ³⁰ "who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time -- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions -- and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹ "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Peter sees the rich man walking off into the distance, and essentially asks, we have left all and

followed you, we did what you told him to do- did we get it right? Is it possible for us to be saved?

So Jesus says to Peter what that rich young ruler did not get to hear, because he couldn't trust. If you surrender anything so as to turn to Christ and follow Him – possessions, family bonds, lands, you do not lose. You receive an hundredfold in this life. How so? In Christ's family you receive brothers and sisters and parents and children. In Christ's church you receive entrance into lands that were not yours for the gospel, you go or you support those who go and plant Christ's flag in that land. You gain the open-hearted generosity of God's people. And make no mistake, you also gain persecutions – this is no health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.

Then beyond all that, you gain eternal life.

You must release your hand, but you soon find out that in Christ, there is no ultimate loss, whereas with the monkey traps of the world, there is no ultimate gain.

Once there was a young rabbi, who was like a shooting star in the galaxy of rabbis. Young, brilliant, and ahead of the other rabbis as far as knowledge, adherence to the Torah, knowledge of the customs. He was still a young man when he became part of the Sanhedrin. So on fire was this young man for the Judaism, that when this new sect appeared, claiming that Jesus was Messiah, he made it his personal ambition to extinguish it.

Then one day, on the road to Damascus, he had a blinding vision. A vision of the Jesus he was persecuting. And he was confronted with loss and gain. His monkey trap – religious pride, and achievement could have kept him enslaved.

Philippians 3:5-6 ⁵ *circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;* ⁶ *concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

But by the miracle of God, he could see that this gain would be loss, if he held onto it.

Philippians 3:7-10 ⁷ *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.* ⁸ *Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ* ⁹ *and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;* ¹⁰ *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,*

For Paul, the riches of what he would gain eclipsed anything in that monkey trap.

Philippians 1:21 ²¹ *For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

It's the principle we've kept seeing in Mark:

Mark 8:35 *"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.*

That's why some who are first, in the world's eyes – like rich young rulers, will be last. And some who are last in the world's eyes, simple, foolish, uneducated, despised, outcasts – they will know their need, unclench their fist, receive the miracle of new birth, and go first into the kingdom.

Can I let go? Can I really risk it? The monkey can't, and so he loses everything, so with humans. The human error is worse, because in letting go, you gain everything.

Do you believe the words we sang earlier?

True, life is sweet, and friends are dear,
And youth and health are pleasant things,
Yet, leave I all, without a tear,
No sad regret my bosom wrings.
The ties of earth are broken all,
My chainless soul, above yon star,
Shall wing its way beyond recall,
To be with Christ is better far.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise
Thou mine inheritance now and always
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

If you can sing those words, it's because a miracle has happened to you – God called you, and loosened your grip on your monkey trap. You had to let go, and you had to turn and trust God, but it was going to be impossible to do it on your own. But God did it.

Maybe you are still hanging onto something, in deathly fear that God's main aim is to rob you and make you miserable. How wrong you are. God loves you and desires that you would know fullness of joy. But you cannot serve two masters and you cannot receive His gift if your hands are full.

Give up your idols to embrace the only God as God. Stop clinging to your own resources. Give up your own good works. Give up your own reputation. Embrace Christ. He calls you today. Come, and you will find your fingers loosening on that thing. You'll see that losing all to gain Christ is all gain.