

Mark 5 (21-43) – Jesus and The Trolley Problem

There is a runaway trolley barreling down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people tied up and unable to move. The trolley is headed straight for them. And you are standing in the train yard, next to a lever. If you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a different set of tracks. But then you see that there is also one immobile person on the side track.

What do you do?

Well, you have two choices. You can either 1) Do nothing and allow the trolley to kill the five people but save the one person. Or 2) Pull the lever, which will kill the one person but save the other five people.

What would you do? What is the right thing to do?

Many would say the answer is simply that one dead is better than five dead. So, you should pull the lever. That seems to be the most practical solution.

However, others would say that the morality of an action is based on whether that action itself is right or wrong. Therefore, you have no right to kill the one person, even if it means the other five will die.

Again, what would you do?

Christians might ask, “What would Jesus do?” And that’s a good question. But what Jesus would do may not be able to be the same thing you should do. Because Jesus can do things that you can’t. Sometimes, the lines between right and wrong don’t seem all that clear, and good people disagree.

There are various scenarios like this that pose hypothetical ethical problems. And there are various philosophies that describe how to deal with such issues. They go by names such as utilitarianism and deontology, both of which I just used to answer what is known as “The Trolley Problem.”

Thankfully, this is only a hypothetical scenario. You're not in this position. And presenting two murderous choices is an unsolvable, no-win predicament. There is no real context given. How did you get to this place? And in a situation where only these two options are given, the opportunity for a pure choice is past. Now only poor choices are left. And you don't owe anyone an explanation when they try and use such tactics.

Such "impossible choices" might reveal your ethics, and your worldview, and help you think through your reasons. But some will use these sorts of hypothetical scenarios as a license to judge God. The religious leaders tried to trap Jesus with these sorts of questions. And he never fell for it, and would often turn the questions around on them.

Still, even though you and I are not going to have to choose whether to pull the lever, as humans, we are sometimes put into impossible, and inescapable situations. It's gone too far, and there is no right answer, no good way out, and no way to avoid some level of guilt, shame, and regret. And these ethical dilemmas, whether hypothetical, or very real in your life, bring you to some of the most pressing questions people have always had.

Where do morals come from? What principals are the highest form of good? What about the problem of evil? Is this life all there is? And if this life is all there really is, then is there no purpose for our pain? How do you know God is good, when you see all this bad? Why do these things even happen?

Some people think these moral questions are ground to blame or disbelieve in God. But you can't make God answer your "this problem should have one solution" questions. God isn't trapped by time, space, or your imagination. There are always mitigating circumstances. Think of the Flood, and how Noah warned the people to change for over one hundred years before God brought judgment. Or how God spared Nineveh when they repented. Or how God would've spared Sodom if there were even just ten righteous people there. God isn't trapped by imaginary scenarios like "Are you going to kill one person or five?" God can do what you can't even imagine.

Now, let's turn to our text, Mark 5:21-43.

Vs.21-24 – Here is Jesus, and up comes Jairus. He is one of the rulers of the synagogue, the local church of Jesus' day. And this prominent leader of the religious community desperately asks Jesus to come heal his very sick twelve-year-old daughter. She is at the point of death. Jesus must come now, and quickly. And Jesus agrees to go, and a great crowd goes with him. They want to see Jesus rescue this young girl from death.

Vs.25-28 – But on his way to heal Jairus' daughter, a woman with her own sickness came up behind Jesus. She had a severe illness for twelve years. Her condition made her unclean, she wasn't allowed in the community, she wasn't allowed in the synagogue, and she wasn't allowed to be touched, for twelve years. But she pushed her way through the crowd, thinking that if she just touched the fringe of Jesus' robe, she would be healed.

Notice that this scene pictures a twelve-year-old girl's illness and a woman's twelve years old illness. And here is Jesus with a "trolley problem." Which person did Jesus value more? Who would he heal? Was it the daughter of a prominent community member, who was about to die? Or the woman, an outcast, who'll never get a chance like this again? Time was of the essence. If you had to decide, which would you heal? If you stop and help the woman, the little girl will die. But if you go to the little girl, the woman will die. Jesus was in an impossible situation. But he wasn't trapped. Jesus was human, but he was also God. And he came to do the impossible.

Vs.29-34 – When the unclean woman touches Jesus' robe, she is healed. But Jesus calls her out. Fearfully, she falls down before him, and tells her story. And Jesus commends her for her faith, and blesses her with peace.

Vs.35-37 – As the woman was still speaking, messengers bring bad news: Jairus' daughter has died. Did Jesus choose the woman over the little girl? She was healed, the little girl was dead. But that isn't the end of the story. Jesus tells Jairus to keep the faith. And they went to Jairus' house.

Vs.38-43 – When Jesus gets to the house, there are people all around, crying for the dead girl. But Jesus says she isn't going to stay dead. He says she's just asleep. The people laugh at Jesus. He was too late. The girl had died. Jesus stopped for the sick woman. He made his tragic choice. Or so they thought. But they didn't know what Jesus could do. And Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from the dead with his words: "*Little girl, I say to you, arise.*"

Jesus isn't trapped by the choices of the "Trolley Problem." People ask, "Who would you save?" And Jesus says, "Both." Jesus is the answer to the problems that humans cannot solve, and cannot even imagine.

Maybe you are thinking about the "Trolley Problem," and you imagine that you could throw yourself onto the tracks and save everyone by giving your own life. Well, that would be noble. But would your body be enough to stop the trolley? And even if it was, it's only one solution to one problem. The real problem is that everyone is trapped on the tracks of life, and the judgment train is on a course to crush us all. And there is no one who can stop it.

No one but Jesus, that is. Jesus is the solution to any trolley problem. By dying on the cross for your sins, he was throwing himself in the way of your judgment. Jesus was crushed to save you. Seven hundred years before Jesus, Isaiah 53:5 prophesied about this, saying – *...he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.* Jesus doesn't have to decide between saving one or five. He isn't concerned about utilitarianism or deontological ethics. It doesn't matter what side of the tracks you come from, or how trapped you may be. The trolley problem is no problem for Jesus Christ. Jesus is saving people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. That can be you, today.

There are problems that people can't solve, questions that humans can't answer, situations that give you no choice. But Jesus himself is the solution to life's most pressing problems and impossible situations. You can't make all the right choices. But you can choose Jesus. He's your answer.