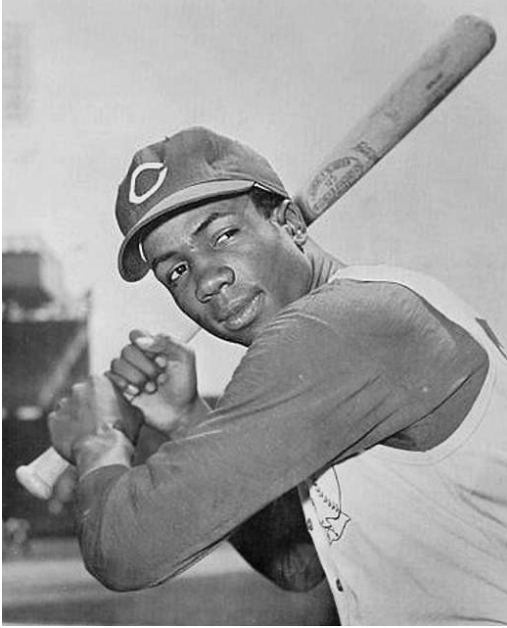


How close is close enough?

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Frank Robinson. That's who first said, "Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades." Actually, the quote by the Hall of Fame player, coach, manager, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2005) in its entirety which appeared in Time Magazine (July 31, 1973) said, "Close don't count in baseball. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."

Close can be but is not always close enough. Take, for instance, this encounter of a religious leader and Jesus.

¹⁸A ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰"You know the commandments, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.' " ²¹And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth." ²²When Jesus heard this, He said to

him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Luke 18:18–22 (NASB95)

As resumes go, this guy had some high points. Since his coming under the Law (think age-of-accountability...or *bar-mitzva*), the leader had kept the Mosaic law perfectly. That's quite a statement! Yet, Jesus still pointed to something that was missing. He tells the man to divest himself of worldly possessions and become a follower. Jesus is not advocating a vow of poverty. He is chipping away at what this man relied on for righteousness with God...apart from surrendering to the Messiah.

This man would point to his achievements, his background, and his affiliations as accomplishments. Jesus treated them as obstacles. Not that the Law was a stumbling block. We know that the Law is good...unless we trust in it to make us righteous before God. The same is true with security. Sometimes we can trust more in our retirement account for the future, than the God who holds the future. We can trust more in our training than in our calling. We can trust more in our success than in the Savior. That's the point. We NEED/REQUIRE someone to save us. We cannot save ourselves. No matter how perfect we think we are. No matter our training or background. No matter what our genealogical record is. To be righteous before God, we must be rescued by God.

Does God rescue everyone? Of course not. In fact, when we read the rest of this story (Luke 18:23-30), Jesus indicates that this man was not a believer because of the difficulty of surrender. The Gospel writer records that the man left Jesus' presence filled with sorrow BECAUSE of his vast wealth. He wanted to bring one thing with him into the presence of God. Just one. But God requires that we come to Him

empty-handed. The opening verse of the beloved hymn, "Just as I am," captures this perfectly: "Just as I am, without one plea. But, that Thy blood was shed for me..." (Charlotte Elliott, 1835).

Since there are no perfect Christians, who then can be saved? Jesus said that salvation is impossible with man's efforts but achieved perfectly by God's grace (Luke 18:27). Who then does God save and how can we be assured of it? The Bible says that Salvation is a gift by God's grace and experienced as we exercise faith in Him (Ephesians 2:8-9). So, assurance is tied to the demonstration of faith. That's as true for us as it was for the religious leader. If there is any command that we refuse, we cannot be fully assured of our right-standing before God. (That's why the ruler came to Jesus even though he had such a strong religious resume). Something was missing and he hoped to obtain it.

Recently I was asked about the importance of baptism. While baptism is not a requirement to be saved, it is certainly a command for those who are saved and evidence of one's faith in Christ as Lord. All believers are commanded to be baptized as a confession of their faith. Baptism is the biblically required confession of faith. It is not a second level of grace or the product of an extended discipleship journey. It may be difficult to submit to, but that doesn't make it irrelevant or unachievable.

Baptism is an act of obedience. It is either ON or OFF. No one gets *kinda* baptized. You either are, or you're not. I have watched friends wade out into some of the snakiest watering holes in South Asia or step down into murky springs behind fortress-like walls to be baptized. These candidates came, at times, from hours-long journeys to confess faith in Jesus! And they do so in the predominantly Hindu culture where it can be a capital offense to "convert" someone from Hinduism to Christianity. They risk their lives and their family's lives and the lives of their church family to confess Christ. Why? Because Jesus commanded believer's baptism as a profession of faith in Him. Jesus Himself submitted to John's baptism (over and against John's initial protest...which is another sermon entirely). Baptism is important and I maintain that the Bible teaches, and experience affirms, that apart from it, something is lacking. Something is amiss. Like with the religious ruler to whom Jesus speaks, "One thing you lack," the peace with God that He desires and provides is elusive until we yield completely to the Master's commands.

One last observation on this gospel story. **Jesus let the man walk away.** He did not compromise on His instruction. He did not accept the premise that the man was close to the Kingdom and that close was close enough for now while the man grew in the faith necessary to follow Jesus. He permitted the man to walk away, sorrowfully. That sorrow was twofold. Jesus was sorrowful, desiring the man's repentance (See Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34). I imagine that the religious leader spent many sleepless nights thinking about how close he was to the peace of assurance of eternal life. I imagine that Jesus' instructions played on a loop in his mind and heart. In fact, I have enough experience with this kind of surrender that I can say without any doubt...the conviction of needed surrender remained until the man either hardened his heart against it or surrendered his will to it. God is too loving to leave us "close." Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.

So how do we, as believers, view and deal with a person's, in this case the ruler's, unwillingness to surrender? This may be the most significant point of all. We love the ruler and continue to press for surrender. We continue to pray for God to grant repentance. We labor under the burden of concern for as long as there is a burden. We express the same sorrowful desire Jesus exhibited when crying out that He longed to gather Israel to Himself, but they were unwilling. We never give up on the rulers we know, and we never surrender the steadfast assurance of God's Word. That's true for the man who refuses

baptism. That's true for the woman who refuses to relinquish a stronghold. Whether this person is a genuine believer or not is above my paygrade; however, my loving, kind, encouraging, and exhortative call to obedient submission is the centerpiece of my mission as a pastor, but more significantly as a Christ-follower. After all, *close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades*.