

Jesus Teaches the Way to Eternal Life

Matthew 19:16-30

Key Verse: 19:21

"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."

In the previous passage, Jesus gave a strong teaching against divorce and blessed children who were brought to him. In today's passage, Jesus answers a rich young man's question: "What must I do to get eternal life?" Not completely satisfied with Jesus' answer, Jesus then gives him a personal challenge: "Sell everything and follow me." His response to Jesus is sad. Jesus then warns the rich and encourages anyone who has left earthly things for his sake. His warning and promise are for us as well. This passage teaches us two things about God and a command and a promise for followers of Jesus.

I. Jesus Teaches A Rich Man How to have Treasure in Heaven (16-22)

First, only God is good. After blessing children, Jesus went on from there. Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" What a great question, much better than the Pharisees' question about divorce. What do we know about this man who asked this question? The passage tells us that this man was both rich and young. He was the envy of many young men and the dream-husband of many young women because of his wealth. Yet, men and women who are wise know that money does not equate with happiness or eternal life.

This man had obtained wealth at a young age, perhaps by inheritance or hard work or good luck in the stock market. We don't even know his name. We only know that he was a rich young man. One good thing is that he came to Jesus. And he came with a great question: "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Notice that he called Jesus "Teacher." He respected Jesus as a man of knowledge--of God, of heaven, and of eternal life. He came to the right person to ask such a question. Even so, he did not know that Jesus is far more than a teacher. Jesus is the Son of Man who will one day sit on his glorious throne.

The rich young man thought there was some good thing he could do to get eternal life. His idea was based on some kind of merit system: do something good and get something in return. For example, if you work hard, you can get a paycheck. If you study hard, you can get good grades on your report card. If you train hard, you can win a competition and get a trophy or prize money or your name recognized. This man did not ask how to get any of these things. He asked how he could get eternal life.

How did Jesus answer him? Look at verse 17. "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments." First, notice that Jesus drew this man's attention to God and his commandments. Jesus commented on the man's use of the word "good" saying, "There is only One who is good." The Bible says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." (Ps 107:1) Only God is all good, all the time. In contrast, human beings are evil. We sin every day. In Noah's time, God saw that "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." (Gen 6:5) What! Aren't our hearts good? Isn't it right to "Follow our hearts"? Well, I searched for "Follow your heart" in the Bible and I found only one occurrence, Ecclesiastes 11:9. It says, "Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." Jeremiah 17:9 warns about the heart: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Not only Jeremiah, but Jesus said that out of the human heart come evil thoughts which make a person unclean (Mk 7:21ff). Paul wrote in Romans 3:12, "There is no one who does good, not even one." Wise King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:20, "Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins."

Only God is good. Jesus drew this rich young man's attention to God, the only One who is good. Jesus also said, "If you want to enter life, keep the commandments." The man asked about getting eternal life. Jesus replied about entering life. This man had not yet entered life. Of course, he was living person, not a ghost, but he had not yet entered life. He had not yet really begun to live. He talked about getting eternal life as if he could grab it. But Jesus told him about entering life. It echoes Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Have you entered through the narrow gate? Have you entered life? John 17:3 has a very relevant definition of eternal life: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Entering eternal life begins with knowing Jesus Christ and the only true God.

Jesus told him that to enter life he had to keep the commandments. Keeping God's commands leads to eternal life. Leviticus 18:5 says, "Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD." The problem is that no one can perfectly keep God's commands, since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom 3:23) Paul wrote in Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." This is why we all need a Savior. At this point, the rich young man asked Jesus a second question, "Which ones?", that is, "which commandments must I keep." I've been told there are 613 commandments in the Jewish law. The man wanted Jesus to narrow down the list to a few. He was hoping Jesus would write the book, "Eternal Life for Dummies" or some Cliff Notes on eternal life to make it easier. Jesus' answer drew his attention to the second half of the Ten Commandments. Jesus told him, "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' [Ex 20:12-16; Deut 5:16-20] and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" [Lev 19:18] From The Ten Commandments, Jesus recited the ones concerning a right relationship with people. Jesus also added the summary commandment: "love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus once called this the second greatest commandment, next to loving God.

20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" This man claimed that he had never murdered, nor committed adultery, nor stolen, nor testified falsely, nor dishonored his parents. Not only so, he claimed that he loved his neighbor as himself. Who, in all honesty, can really claim that they have loved anyone as themselves? In my observation and experience, people don't even love those closest to them like this. For example, my children like to compete with and harrass one another. If Andrew has a play date with a friend, Hannah says, "That's not fair!" Not only siblings but spouses also do not love each other as themselves (except maybe Dr. James and Sarah Kim, who said they never had a fight in 38 years of marriage so far). "All these I have kept." It seems that this rich young man did not really know himself.

The rich young man's third question is just as telling: "What do I still lack?" The fact that he came to Jesus trying to get eternal life shows that he knew he was missing something. Even though he went through the motions of religion, he didn't have any assurance that he possessed eternal life. He knew that his great wealth did not guarantee him a place in heaven. Maybe he became afraid when he read a car bumper sticker that said, "Eternal life: don't leave earth without it." He got many things with his great wealth. Still, he wanted to add eternal life to his collection. His self-righteousness blinded him to God and the serious situation of his soul and he was in for a big surprise.

Second, sell everything and follow Jesus. At this point, Jesus let the man know what he really needed to do. Look at verse 21. 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." Jesus knew just the thing this man needed to do to be perfect or complete in his life. Jesus knew the very thing which blocked this man's path from truly knowing and experiencing God. It was Money. Money was his idol which took the place of God in his heart. He trusted and depended on his wealth rather than God. He had accumulated much wealth on earth, but he had no treasure in heaven.

Jesus had said in Matthew 6:19-21: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Speaking of thieves, this week I almost purchased a home security system for my house. It sounded like a good deal and a good idea to protect my family and possessions. In the end, we decided not to get it, yet it showed me how easy it is for me to invest time, money and effort in earthly possessions.

Jesus also said in Matthew 6:24, "You cannot serve both God and Money." Jesus challenged this rich young man to exchange earthly treasure for treasure in heaven. Having money is not the problem. Loving money is the problem, for it can cause people to wander from the faith and disown God (1Tim 6:10; Prov 30:9).

Around the year 1200, Francis of Assisi, the son of a rich Italian merchant, took Jesus' words "sell everything and follow me" very literally. He gave up his wealthy inheritance in order to follow Jesus Christ as a poor, itinerant

preacher. Through his sincere faith and example, thousands have been influenced to follow Christ. Moses renounced the wealth and treasures of Egypt to side with the suffering people of God, because he was looking ahead to his reward (Heb 11:25-26). Jesus Christ is the King of heaven. Yet he gave up all his glory to live among us, suffer rejection, torture and murder out of his love for God and for us.

Then what does it mean for us to "sell everything and give"? Jesus calls all his followers to "sell and give away" all worldly attachments, pleasures and loves in our hearts in order to love and trust Jesus above all other things. "Sell everything" means that Jesus calls us to a new lifestyle, a new relationship of trust in him.

George Mueller (d.1898) is legendary in his faith to trust in God's provision through prayer. He wrote: Every one is invited and commanded to trust in the Lord, to trust in Him with all his heart, and to cast his burden upon Him, and to call upon Him in the day of trouble. Will you not do this, my dear brethren in Christ? I desire that you may taste the sweetness of that state of heart, in which, while surrounded by difficulties and necessities, you can yet be at peace, because you know that the living God, your Father in heaven, cares for you. [A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealing with George Muller]

Jesus also gave this rich young man a great invitation saying: "Then come, follow me." It was a once in a lifetime opportunity to be Jesus' full time disciple. What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means more than attending church on Sunday or attending a Bible study. To follow Jesus means to listen to Jesus, learn from Jesus, and trust in Jesus. These days so many people listen to and imitate pop artists like musicians, athletes or dancers, or talk show hosts or models, or scientists or professors or authors. People are easily drawn more to image and worldly knowledge rather than to character. Sometimes, when we have a problem or question, we depend solely on a friend. To follow Jesus means to go to him in his word and prayer when we have a question or a problem--when we are confused, worried or angry. Those who trust Jesus and give him first place in their hearts and lives have treasure in heaven and eternal life.

Verse 22 is one of the most disappointing verses in the Bible: "When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." One Bible scholar called this The Great Refusal. He went away sad, because he refused the greatest offer to be Jesus' disciple. He went away sad, because he knew that what Jesus said was true, but he couldn't make that choice, that sacrifice. He went away sad, because he said 'no' to Jesus.

Here we must ask ourselves: Is there anything or anyone that I treasure more than God? Jesus calls us too to exchange this thing or person for treasure in heaven and to follow him. For some, this may be a material possession, or a human honor, an earthly security, a worldly achievement or dream, a small pleasure or sinful habit.

Americans are prone to idols of materialism and pleasure-seeking. We are the world's consumers of products, food, gadgets, movies, clothes. Jesus challenges us to love and trust him more than money or success or pleasure. We can

learn from Matthew the tax collector. He left his secure job and high pay to follow Jesus. One beautiful way I recently see investments in heaven happening is through giving in various ways to support our African conferences. Two other ways our children are participating in giving to the needy: CBF children saving and giving for Angel Tree children, and HBF's mission trip to Ecuador. May all of these acts of giving be acceptable to God as our love for Jesus. May God help us each to give away all idols in our hearts to love and follow Jesus.

II. Jesus Teaches His Disciples about Salvation and Eternal Life (23-30)

First, only God can save. Jesus was very sorry that this rich young man rejected Jesus' offer of discipleship to the detriment of the man's soul. Then Jesus spoke to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The camel was the largest land animal in that area. The eye of a needle was the smallest opening. To get a camel through the eye of a needle or a horse through a keyhole is impossible. Yet Jesus said that this is easier than a rich person entering the kingdom of heaven. Does this mean then that no rich person can get into heaven? No, for Abraham, Lydia and Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy believers in the Bible who found favor with God. Still, Jesus says that for a rich person to enter heaven is very, very hard. Why is it so? It is because wealth easily becomes our security and substitute in place of trusting and relying on God. It is much easier to trust our money or someone else's when we are hungry or in need, rather than to trust in God.

When the disciples heard Jesus' words, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" They thought that wealth was a sign of God's blessing and favor, so if it was hard for the rich to be saved, then who could be saved? In verse 26, Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Only in God can a camel go through the eye of a needle [camel through needle cartoon]. Only in God can a rich person be saved. Only in God can anyone be saved. This is the point: no person can save himself by his own effort, ability or goodness. We all need the grace of God to be saved.

Second, a great promise for Jesus' followers. Upon hearing that it is impossible for man to be saved apart from God, Peter answered Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Perhaps Peter was still thinking about the rich young man who walked away sad, refusing treasure in heaven. Peter and the other disciples had left their careers and comforts to be Jesus' disciples. Maybe Peter was hoping to hear more about that treasure in heaven. He did not ask what he had to do, but what they were going to get. Jesus did not rebuke him.

Jesus promised rewards for those who have sacrificed for his sake. He said to them in verses 28-30: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or

sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Jesus mentioned the renewal of all things. One day all things will be made new. Jesus will sit on his glorious throne as King and Judge. Jesus' followers will also sit on twelve thrones. They will judge the 12 tribes of Israel. Then Jesus gave a promise for everyone who has left possessions or family for his sake. What does it mean to leave family for his sake? It does not mean to run away from home because you don't get along with your parents. It means that one has left close family ties in order to live for Jesus and the gospel. Jesus promised that whoever has left anything for his sake will receive 100 times as much plus eternal life. Jesus promises 100 times more of any good thing we've given up for his sake. In other words, it will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Jesus will repay 100 times over all losses for his sake. St. Paul understood this. Regarding his former achievements without Christ he said, "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ..." (Phil 3:7-9) Jesus also stated that many who are first will be last, and the last first.

Today's passage reminds us that only God is good and only God can save us. It is impossible to get eternal life by our own effort or goodness. Self-righteousness and self-centeredness hinder us from entering the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is a gift of God's grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith --and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast." We also learn that God wants us to trust him and give him first place in our hearts and lives, above everything and everyone. Is there something or someone in your life taking the place of God? Jesus challenges us all to give it away in exchange for treasure in heaven. Jesus invites us all to follow him. Following and trusting Jesus is the way to inherit eternal life.