

Text: Matthew 19:16-30

Title: The Rich Young Ruler

Truth: Salvation is so difficult as to be impossible to attain—by man.

Date/Location: June 19, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

The material keeps coming. The Lord’s three-plus year ministry is compressed into a fairly small amount of text, and Matthew has to keep moving efficiently from one event to the next. After teaching on marriage, divorce, those who are gifted to be single, and blessing some little children, the Lord is approached by a wealthy young man with a question about his soul.

There is a lot we can criticize about this fellow, but give him this: he had some concerns about his own soul. That is more than we can say for some people.

I. The Address and Question, v. 16

- A. The man addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher.” We cannot be certain the full extent of what he thought of Jesus, but we can safely say the following. He understood that Jesus was a good man. We know there was no one better, but someone only superficially familiar with Christ would not know that. As a good man, Jewish theology would think of him (thinking of him as a regular man) as on his way to heaven. He was pleasing to God, like Abraham or Moses or Elijah or Enoch.
- B. He then asks his question: what good thing (work?) shall I do to obtain eternal life. He either wanted to obtain it, or make sure he had already obtained eternal life. With this question, he starts off on the wrong path, because salvation is never about what good we do, but only about the good already done by Jesus.

II. Jesus Responds to the Address and Question, v. 17

- A. “Good Teacher”? Jesus points the man to the ultimate standard of goodness. He humbly ignores Himself, though He does fit the description of *good*.

B. What to do? To enter into eternal life, Jesus says, you have to keep the commandments. We could understand this two ways. First, Jesus holds out law-keeping as a valid way to obtain salvation. This is not correct, as we know from Romans 3:20. Second, Jesus could be using Law-keeping to bring the man to recognize that He cannot keep the Law. Said another way, the Law can be used as a positive way to obtain life—which it is not—or in a negative way to show that it cannot be obtained because the Law cannot be kept.

III. The Man Asks Another Question, Jesus Replies, v. 18-19

A. The man responded with a question: “Which ones?” He’s continuing down the wrong path. The “good teacher” has just told you that you have to keep “the” commandments. The grammar indicates these commandments are well-known to Jesus and the people to whom He speaks. The young man should have known.

B. But Jesus responds with a list of commandments:

1. You shall not murder.
2. You shall not commit adultery.
3. You shall not steal.
4. You shall not bear false witness.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

C. The sixth in the list is an umbrella command which is the second great summarizing-commandment from Matthew 22:39—and Leviticus 19:18. In Exodus 20:17, the final of the 10 commandments is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s...” and the command to love your neighbor does include this one. You might wonder why the Lord did not include this commandment also.

D. I wonder why Jesus did not include the first four of the 10 commandments? My speculation is that since the last six—the second table of the law—deal with human to human relationships, that was enough to show the young man he was not going to heaven. The first table of the Law is even “harder” because it has to do with our relationship to God, not man.

IV. The Man Boldly Replies, v. 20

- A. The man said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”
- B. He was not “getting” it. There is no way that he kept the letter *and* spirit of the Law in all of these cases perfectly. Did he never hate anyone? Look with lust at a woman? Take something, even small, that belonged to someone else? Lie, even a white lie? Never talk back at his parents when he was young? Always look out for others as much as he looked out for himself? Impossible.
- C. The fact that his conscience did not strike him shows that he was taught a superficial understanding of the holiness of God and the Law of Moses. He was thinking “externally, as far as I can remember and I’m not thinking too hard about it, my general pattern has been to look like a good person.”
- D. Bottom line: he just lied to Jesus. There is none righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). There is none who does good, no, not one (Romans 3:12). All have sinned (Romans 3:23). He did not admit that he is sinner and stands in need of forgiveness from God. Not only did he lie, but he was also proud, the direct opposite of what the Lord just taught in chapter 18 about being humble like a little child.
- E. Then the young man asks, as if that matter is completely settled, “What do I still lack?” It is like he said, “That’s no sweat. What else?”

V. The Lord Replies a Third Time, v. 21-22

- A. Jesus then gives the standard: “If you want to be perfect...” That is what it takes to have eternal life.
- B. What comes next, I believe, is an instruction specifically for this young man. It does not apply to everyone. It shows specifically where this fellow had the most difficulty in being righteous. The other five commandments were enough to condemn him, but this one was obvious.
- C. The Lord Jesus said:

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow Me.”

D. The young man’s problem was materialism. It is connected to that sixth commandment that we did not see earlier, to not covet. He was trusting in riches. He could not let them go or use them for God. He did not care about the impoverished around him.

Psalm 49:6-8 Those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches, 7 None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him—8 For the redemption of their souls is costly...

Psalm 62:10 If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

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.

E. The result of selling what he owned would be to deposit something more important than earthly riches, into his heavenly account. He would be demonstrating a spirit that seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). And with no riches in which to trust or to follow, he would be able to follow Christ.

F. Let all this sink in for a minute. The young man had to process it all and then...

G. He went away. He was sad because to have eternal life was so costly that he could not deal with it. He was very wealthy, and evidently his security was in his riches, not in God. He was more concerned about wealth than sin; about riches than righteousness.

VI. The After-Class for the Disciples, v. 23-30

A. It is impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Since we know that entering that kingdom requires being born again, then substitute: it is impossible for rich people to be born again. They just had an example of it before their eyes.

B. Now, we know salvation is not impossible for God, because of verse 26. But humanly speaking, sins including covetousness,

greed, and the lack of recognizing them as such, keeps people from seeing their need and the provision God has made for them.

C. Some details.

1. I summarized just now with “impossible” because the camel through a needle’s eye is basically that. It is *not* happening.
2. Who is rich? If you are in the United States and reading these notes, most likely you are. You may have a lesser or greater degree of riches, but I’m not seeing a ton of grinding, abject poverty around here, the kind you see in dirt-floor communities in third-world countries.
3. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are synonyms because those phrases are used interchangeably in verses 23 and 24.

D. The disciples recognized the impossibility of salvation. They were concerned about the whole matter, but this episode made them think about their own situation.

E. The Lord agreed—with men it is impossible. But with God, the impossible becomes possible because He has ability that we do not have. It is the infinite over the finite, the omnipotent over the weak.

F. Verse 27 records Peter’s statement reflecting on the fact that they have left everything, just like the Lord had asked of the rich young ruler. The Lord does not always ask His followers to do that, but in these cases He did. Peter is asking what the “treasure in (the kingdom of) heaven” will look like.

G. The Lord responds: in that time, which he calls the regeneration when Jesus will sit on His throne of His glory, at that time the disciples will also have a place next to the Lord ruling the tribes of Israel. That will be a place of prominence and power and service to God.

H. Similarly, all who leaves behind precious things in this life will receive many times more than that in the kingdom and eternal life on top of that.

Conclusion

The statement of verse 30 about the first being last and the last first, introduces the parable of the workers in chapter 20. We will have to wait until we can study that in depth to get the full effect.

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