

Jesus Teaches the Rich Young Ruler
Matthew 19:16-22
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

This section of Matthew begins as the first half of this chapter began, with Jesus being asked a question. This time not from the Pharisees, but from “*someone*.” Knowing who asked Jesus this question requires not only looking at the context of Matthew, but the other synoptic Gospels as well.

In Matthew 19:16-17, the person is described as male and in 19:20, Matthew the questioner is further identified as “*The young man*.” We learn he was wealthy from Matthew 19:22, “But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property” (cf. Luke 18:23, “*for He was extremely rich*”).

Neither Matthew 19:16-22, nor Mark 10:17-22 informs us that he was a ruler. This is found only in Luke 18:18, “*A ruler questioned Him, saying, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”*” From all these verses, we call this person “the rich young ruler.”

The young man’s first question (19:16)

Matthew 19:16 records the young man’s question, “*Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?*” When we compare this question to how Mark and Luke record the question, we can observe a difference. Mark and Luke’s Gospels write, ““*Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Mark 10:17).

Thus Mark and Luke use the word “good” to modify “teacher,” whereas Matthew uses the word “good” to modify “thing.” This becomes more significant because Mark and Luke describe Jesus’ response to the young man as “*Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone*” (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Matthew on the other hand, records Jesus as saying, “*Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only one who is good*” (19:17).

One solution that is commonly suggested is that Luke copied Mark’s Gospel and Matthew, writing after Mark, changed these words in order for the early church to avoid the insinuation that Jesus was not sinless. This is obviously a low view of the Gospels, for it requires us to believe that Matthew altered the words of the young man and of Jesus to fit an agenda. Furthermore, the idea includes Matthew, who was present for this, needing to use Mark’s Gospel as a source, even though Mark was not there.

A better understanding of this is that both the young man and Jesus truly said what the Scripture describes them as saying. Certainly the biblical writers do not include all that was said or done by Jesus, *“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written”* (John 21:25). Therefore, Matthew omits the young man calling Jesus “good,” while Mark and Luke omit him calling “good” the thing he wondered that must be done.

Inherent in the thing that the young man wondered must be done is the concept of it being “good.” This may account for why Mark and Luke left it out. Certainly, there are no non-good things that anyone would think would be necessary to obtain eternal life!

Matthew does include the reply by Jesus to the issue of the man calling Him a *“good teacher”* when he records, *“There is only One who is good”* (19:17). Therefore, there is the implication that Matthew was aware of Jesus being called good, but omitted that from the question only to include it in Jesus’ response. In this way, Matthew aligns with Mark and Luke.

The major error of this young man’s question was by asking what good thing he must do. He believes that eternal life is obtained through some sort of external act. Furthermore, he also believes that he maintains the ability to do this himself. This is a classic example of one with a works oriented view of salvation. Rather than asking what he could do to obtain eternal life, he should have asked how one obtains eternal life.

Jesus answers the first question (19:17))

Jesus’ answer, *“Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments,”* appears counter to the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from works. Was Jesus wrong to say a person can enter into life by keeping the commandments?

First of all, Jesus spoke the truth, anyone who keeps the commandments will enter eternal life. Of course, this is impossible for *“there is none righteous, not even one”* (Romans 3:10). Everyone has fallen short of keeping the commandments and *“whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all”* (James 2:10). This truth is included in the words of Jesus, *“There is only One who is good.”* In other words, only God is good (a statement regarding Christ’s deity) and therefore, this man was not righteous in himself.

Furthermore, part of keeping the commandments includes *“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”* (Matthew 22:37). This is the essence of saving faith. If we keep the commandments of God, we will necessarily have faith. And if we have faith, it is the result of God’s grace, not our works (Ephesians 2:8-9). In reality, obedience apart from faith in God is not only inadequate, but truly impossible.

Also, we must recognize that Jesus knew about the man and was leading him through a process to understand what it meant to follow Him as a disciple. So this answer by Jesus is in that context. This is why Jesus replies with *“There is only One who is good.”* Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19 restate these same words with *“No one is good except God alone.”* This leads to the instruction by Jesus about the man’s true need, for he is not God and therefore is not good.

The young man’s second question (19:18a)

Matthew alone records the follow up question the rich young ruler posed to Jesus after hearing about the need to keep the commandments, *“Which ones?”* Mark and Luke omit this and combine both of Jesus’ answers together. What is clear by this question is that the man focused upon the words of Jesus about keeping the commandments rather than the words of Jesus about only One being good. The man continued under the delusion that keeping the commandments was possible for him.

The question of which commandments Jesus specifically referred to is understandable in the context of the rabbinical debate of the day. We see a lawyer of the Pharisees seek to test Jesus by asking Him, *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”* (Matthew 22:35-36). Which commandment(s) were the most significant was the subject of much discussion and so this rich man asked Jesus to clarify which commandments were the ones He referred to.

Jesus answers the second question (19:18b-19)

This question gave Jesus the perfect opportunity to develop the man’s need to help him to recognize his inability to keep the commandments. This resulted in the words that *“Jesus said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’”* These represent the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and fifth commandments from Exodus 20 in that order. Also, these commandments all involved external, observable sinful behavior.

Matthew omits the commandment "*Do not defraud*," that Mark records in Mark 10:19, which may be the application of the commands to not steal and to not bear false witness. Also, unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew includes the command, "*YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF*" from Leviticus 19:18.

What is noteworthy about Jesus' list of commandments is that while it includes the second half of the Decalogue, it omits that tenth commandment, "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*" This may be an implicit way to communicate to the man what his core issue was that prevented him from obtaining eternal life, for the man would have surely recognized that Jesus ended after the ninth commandment.

The young man's third question (19:20)

The young man responds to Jesus' list of commandments with the rather brazen, "*All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?*" Such a statement that he had kept all of these commandments is delusional. Jesus' list of commandments moves progressively from one that the man very likely had kept to one that the man had definitely not kept, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

This perspective mirrors many in our society today, who evaluate themselves in light of their own standards. As people create their own moral code, they can perceive themselves as righteous when they compare themselves with others who have fallen short. This typical sense of self-righteousness is not only biased toward oneself, it also neglects the true sense of these commandments as taught by Jesus in Matthew 5:21-48. People, like this young man, can only consider their external actions, not their internal attitude.

Nevertheless, as confident as the young man was in his obedience, he still regarded himself as lacking. He somehow knew he had no personal assurance of eternal life, in spite of his own sense of righteousness. Even though he said he had kept each one of the commandments that Jesus quoted to him, he still knew it was potentially inadequate.

This lack of assurance of eternal life is necessarily the case when anyone seeks to earn their eternal destiny by doing good deeds. There is no ability to be sure that we have done enough. Even those who profess faith in Christ can view their salvation as dependent upon their works as well, undermining the assurance that saving faith brings. This is therefore not salvation based faith in Christ alone, but faith plus certain works that must be done. Thus it is a corruption of the gospel by adding necessary works to salvation. Assurance points toward saving faith.

Jesus answers the third question (19:21)

Jesus answered the man's third question about what he lacked by addressing his true deficiency. If the man sought to keep all the commandments in order to be "perfect" (ESV) or "complete" (NASB) in his obedience, he was told to *"go and sell your possessions and give to the poor."* Salvation through this man's efforts required perfect, complete obedience to the commandments (cf. Matthew 5:48), which was impossible. We know that *"if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly"* (Galatians 2:21).

Jesus sought to help him understand his true need by emphasizing why he was confused in thinking that he had kept the commandments. If the man had indeed been obedient to the commandment, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself,"* he would have shared his possessions with those in need who had significantly less than him. Jesus showed him that he indeed did not love his neighbor as much as he loved himself.

The implication that Jesus made by omitting the tenth commandment, also gave him the opportunity to consider why he never gave his possessions to the poor before, for he may have also been guilty of being covetous in the amassing of his wealth. Certainly we find his attachment to his wealth to be an impediment to faith in Christ.

But complete, perfect obedience did not come from selling his possessions in order to give to the poor. This required Jesus' statement *"come, follow Me."* It was impossible to follow Jesus and love one's possessions, *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"* (Matthew 6:24).

The promise of Jesus if he would sell his possessions and follow was, *"you will have treasure in heaven."* This was in contrast to his treasure on earth, and is a precursor to Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 19:28-30. By truly believing in Jesus and following Him, we store up our treasure in heaven. *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:19-21).

Some have viewed Jesus as teaching about discipleship, and its rewards, beyond eternal life. However, these words answer the question, *"what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life."* Eternal life comes through faith, which is demonstrated through following Jesus.

The young man's response

The evidence that Jesus' point to the young man was about following Him is verified by the decision of the man to not follow Jesus. He is described as desiring to obtain eternal life, but *"he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property."* The ESV translates the word grieving, as sorrowful, which is more literal and better captures the man's selfish emotional response.

The NASB says that the man *"owned much property,"* as opposed to the ESV translation of *"had great possessions,"* since the Greek word KTEMA was typically used for land. Because he was unwilling to leave his property behind to follow Jesus, he would be left with only his property, which he would lose (cf. Matthew 16:25-26).

This reflects many people today. So many think they are keeping some moral code of conduct sufficiently. There is an innate desire in mankind for eternal life, along with a sense of God that drives the multitudes to various religious practices. There is even an emotional attraction to eternal life, but not to the point of worshipping the true God alone over the worship of one's own self and one's own personal ideals. Their disappointment is based upon not receiving what they desire out of their religion, rather than a true sense of loss of eternal life.

If this young man, or anyone else then or now, truly believed that they would not obtain eternal life without following Jesus, they would change. Intellectually, people can understand what Jesus said in Matthew 16:26, *"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"* The issue is that they refuse to believe it. They do not follow because they lack true faith.

True faith results in following Jesus. This is beyond simply trying not to sin. This is beyond wanting to live eternally. This is beyond giving up our possessions to the poor, for *"if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing"* (1 Corinthians 13:3). There is absolutely nothing that we can do that achieves eternal life on our terms, since *"With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26).

When offered the opportunity to follow Jesus, this rich young man had other competing considerations. Hence he valued something else, *"for he was one who owned much property."* His unwillingness to surrender his property testified to his lack of true faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Clearly, the story of the rich young ruler teaches us attachment to great wealth is a stumbling block to following Jesus. This is also taught in 1 Timothy 6:9-10, “*But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*” We cannot love both possessions and God (Matthew 6:24).

We must observe the story of this young man in the context of Jesus’ incarnation and ministry. The disciples demonstrated their faith when “*they left their nets and followed Him*” (Matthew 4:20) and when “*immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him*” (Matthew 4:22). The young man was unwilling to follow Jesus. Of course, among them was Judas who also left possessions to follow Jesus but did not have true faith, as well as many who followed Jesus temporarily (cf. John 6:66).

However, others with faith did not give up everything they owned. Jesus said that salvation had come to Zaccheus, though his response was “*Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much*” (Luke 19:8-9). Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Joseph of Arimathea used their wealth in service to Jesus (Luke 8:3; Matthew 27:57). In Acts 5:32-37, we find believers who continued to own property that they subsequently used to serve the church, under the leadership of the apostles.

Therefore, the specific issue with the rich young ruler was his unwillingness to follow Jesus in faith, not that he owned much property. He was attached to what he owned, which prevented him from surrendering himself to Christ in faith. This man was the example of Matthew 6:24, “*You cannot serve God and wealth.*”

In our context, when even our poor are wealthy in terms of people throughout history, the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 are of great significance. “*Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.*”