

# What Must I do?

*Learning the Law and the Gospel*

Luke 18:18 And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, **what must I** do to inherit eternal life?”

<sup>19</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

<sup>20</sup> You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’ ”

<sup>21</sup> And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.”

<sup>22</sup> When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, **follow** me.”

<sup>23</sup> But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

<sup>24</sup> Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!

<sup>25</sup> For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

<sup>26</sup> Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?”

<sup>27</sup> But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

<sup>28</sup> And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and **followed** you.”

<sup>29</sup> And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left **house** or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,

<sup>30</sup> who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

<sup>31</sup> And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.

<sup>32</sup> **For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon.**

<sup>33</sup> And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

<sup>34</sup> But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

<sup>35</sup> As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.  
<sup>36</sup> And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant.  
<sup>37</sup> They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."  
<sup>38</sup> And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"  
<sup>39</sup> And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"  
<sup>40</sup> And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him,  
<sup>41</sup> "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight."  
<sup>42</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; **your faith has made you well.**"  
<sup>43</sup> And immediately he recovered his sight and **followed** him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

(Luke 18:18-43)

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## The Foundational Essay

It may not be the most beautiful **essay** ever written. It may not be the most influential essay or the most important or the most exciting or glamorous. Most have never even heard of it. But for my journey with Christ, I would to this day still call it **the most foundational**. In 1996, I went to The Ark Bookstore around 4<sup>th</sup> and Federal down in Denver, as it was by far the best place around that one could go to buy new Christian books. Long since bankrupt, though our church curiously owns several of their old bookstands, I was perusing an actual theology section in a Christian bookstore, when I stumbled across a new title called *Here We Stand*.

I saw that it was edited by perhaps [my favorite pastor at the time](#), James Montgomery Boice, whose *Foundations of the Christian Faith* was our assigned reading at my mostly Arminian college—but not this professor.<sup>1</sup> Boice laid the groundwork for my Reformed theology, long before I even understood what I was reading. *Here We Stand* arose out of a very specific historical controversy that occurred two years earlier.

In 1994, an [ecumenical document](#) called “[Evangelicals and Catholics Together](#)”<sup>2</sup> was signed and endorsed by a number of prominent Evangelicals, including Chuck Colson, J. I. Packer, Os Guinness, Pat Robertson, Thomas Oden, Mark Noll, and Richard Mouw. The document called for greater cooperation and agreement between the two parties along both [social and theological](#) lines. A fine idea. Most were ok with the social ecumenicism. However, the theological agreement part was quickly opposed by names such as John Ankerberg, D. James Kennedy, John MacArthur, and R. C. Sproul, as they felt it went too far in deem-

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Donald Alexander, who is still on the faculty of Bethel University.

<sup>2</sup> “[Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium](#),” *First Things* (May 1994), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1994/05/evangelicals-catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium>.

phasizing *sola fide*, the heart of the Gospel, a fundamental distinctive of Evangelical theology, and a doctrine that Rome condemned as a heresy at the Council of Trent and never lifted. Later, this group would cite the 1999 Lutheran and Catholic “[Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#)”<sup>3</sup> as proof that Evangelicalism had slid completely off the tracks, given that Rome still had not changed even a single jot or tittle of their doctrine or removed their anathema on this matter.

This was the culture in which I cut my teeth on Reformed Theology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The purpose of the newly formed Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals—made up of 120 Evangelical pastors and leaders and their book *Here We Stand*—which of course takes its name from Martin Luther’s famous words to Rome proclaiming that this was the hill he would die on, was to essentially be a [commentary](#) on their own counter-declaration which they called “[The Cambridge Declaration](#),”<sup>4</sup> because this is where they met together in April of 1996 to draft the document. The book contains eight chapters by the likes of David Wells, Sinclair Ferguson, Robert Godfrey, and others which

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<sup>3</sup> The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, “[Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#),” *Lutheran World* (1999).

<sup>4</sup> “[The Cambridge Declaration](#),” *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* (April 20, 1996).

explicate the various ways they saw Evangelicals as having adopted the “spirit of the age.” But the heart of the book must certainly be Michael Horton’s essay, “The Sola’s of the Reformation.”<sup>5</sup> I say this is the heart of the book, because the Declaration essentially is a short confession of faith on the Five Solas and how they are relevant to our times. Horton was assigned the task of explaining them.

I really had not heard of the *solas* prior to this moment, and perhaps you haven’t either. *Sola* is Latin for “alone.” The five are *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), *sola fide* (“faith alone”), *sola gratia* (“grace alone”), *solus Christus* (“Christ alone”), and *soli Deo gloria* (“to God alone be the glory”).<sup>6</sup> The “alone” is the key, as these were developed very early in the Reformation as catch phrases that marked the Protestant cause as distinct from Rome’s theology. Rome, of course, believes in all of these things, just not “alone” in the sense in which they are meant. Scripture is an authority, *but not alone*, as tradition, papal bulls, and even personal experiences are at least equal if not greater in authority than it. Faith is necessary, *but not alone* in justification, for human

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<sup>5</sup> Michael S. Horton, “The Sola’s of the Reformation,” *Here We Stand*, ed. James M. Boice and Benjamine E. Sasse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996): 99-130.

<sup>6</sup> I’ve written on these in Douglas Van Dorn, *The Five Solas of the Reformation* (Dacono, CO: Waters of Creation, 2019). And see the sermon series here: <https://www.rbcnc.com/five-solas>.

works are also necessary to be justified. Grace is necessary *but not alone*, as the human will is the deciding factor in regeneration. Christ is necessary, *but not the only* mediator we pray to. God gets the glory, *but not alone* as the church and saints and Popes steal some of it.

As I look back on reading Horton's essay, it isn't that I was blown away by the theology. It's that **he put words to everything I had been thinking** for the past many years growing up in Evangelical churches and going to their schools, but never heard anyone else say. I still have the notes in the margin. I didn't write things like, "**I've never heard this before,**" but rather, "**Yes! Yes!**" and "**Amen!**" and "**!!!**" and "**This is why the Gospel never gets boring to me**" and "**Here it is!**" But perhaps more than hearing about the *solas* for the first time, it was something he called **the "law-gospel distinction"** that really was perhaps the most foundational idea I'd ever come across.

I always knew, like all Christians I think, that God wants us to obey the law and believe the Gospel. But things had and continue to be **so profoundly confusing** when you hear sermons and read books on this matter that such a black and white distinction truly cuts through all the fog. He talked

about how people have turned Jesus into a kinder, gentler Moses, and this was certainly my experience. I just couldn't articulate it. I seemed like every sermon I ever heard from a preacher to a Christian was “Here's how to be a better Christian,” and then they always had three points or steps that I could take with me into the week, things I was to “do.” That was my “good news.” The actual gospel? That was strictly for non-Christians. You believe the gospel *to become* a Christian. But you obey Jesus *to be a good* Christian.

Some of my very favorite and most oft used quotes on this distinction I first saw in this essay. *Ursinus*, author of the *Heidelberg Catechism* said that this distinction has “comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures” and are “the chief and general divisions of the holy scriptures, and comprise the entire doctrine comprehended therein.” To confuse them is to corrupt the faith at its core.<sup>7</sup> *Theodore Beza*, who was the chief student of John Calvin, once said, “Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel, is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted

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<sup>7</sup> *Zacharias Ursinus* and G. W. Williard, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati, OH: Elm Street Printing Company, 1888), 2.

(previous to the Reformation) and still corrupt Christianity.”<sup>8</sup> And **Spurgeon** said,

There is no point upon which men make greater mistakes than upon the relation which exists between the law and the gospel. Some men put the law instead of the gospel: others put the gospel instead of the law; some modify the law and the gospel, and preach neither law nor gospel: and others entirely abrogate the law, by bringing in the gospel. Many there are who think that the law is the gospel, and who teach that men by good works of benevolence, honesty, righteousness, and sobriety, may be saved. Such men do err. On the other hand, many teach that the gospel is a law; that it has certain commands in it, by obedience to which, men are meritoriously saved; such men err from the truth, and understand it not. A certain class maintain that the law and the gospel are mixed, and that partly by observance of the law, and partly by God's grace, men are saved. These men understand not the truth, and are false teachers.<sup>9</sup>

I bring all this up as my own background for taking a fresh look at a story we touched upon last time, **the Rich Young Ruler**.

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<sup>8</sup> **Theodore Beza**, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (East Suxxes, Eng.: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> **C. H. Spurgeon**, “Law and Grace (Rom 5 : 20- 21),” *Bible Hub*. [https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/spurgeon/law\\_and\\_grace.htm](https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/spurgeon/law_and_grace.htm).

# The More Things Change...

“**Rich Young Ruler**” is a composite title we get from Luke (“**ruler**”) and Matthew (“**young**”) and all three (“**rich**”), and I’ll come back to why it might matter in a way many have never heard, later. The Synoptic Gospels all tell the story, and it is very similar in each case, also being found just prior to Jesus entering Jerusalem for his last week of life.

Luke 18:18-30	Mark 10:17-31	Matthew 19:16-29
<p><b>18</b> And a <b>ruler</b> asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”</p>	<p><b>17</b> And as he was setting out on his journey, a <b>man</b> ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”</p>	<p><b>16</b> And behold, a <b>man</b> came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”</p>
<p><b>19</b> And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.</p>	<p><b>18</b> And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.</p>	<p><b>17</b> And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.</p>
		<p>If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” <b>18</b> He said to him, “Which ones?”</p>
<p><b>20</b> You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’ ”  <b>Adultery/murder/steal/false-witness/honor-parents</b></p>	<p><b>19</b> You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’ ”  <b>Murder/adultery/steal/false-witness/honor-parents</b></p>	<p>And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, <b>19</b> Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <b>Murder/adultery/steal/false-witness/honor-parents/love-neighbor</b></p>
<p><b>21</b> And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.”</p>	<p><b>20</b> And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.”</p>	<p><b>20</b> The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?”</p>
<p><b>22</b> When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”</p>	<p><b>21</b> And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”</p>	<p><b>21</b> Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”</p>
<p><b>23</b> But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.</p>	<p><b>22</b> Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.</p>	<p><b>22</b> When the <b>young man</b> heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.</p>
<p><b>24</b> Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for <b>those who have wealth</b> to enter the kingdom of God!</p>	<p><b>23</b> And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for <b>those who have wealth</b> to enter the kingdom of God!”</p>	<p><b>23</b> And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a <b>rich person</b> enter the kingdom of heaven.</p>
	<p><b>24</b> And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!</p>	

<b>25</b> For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."	<b>25</b> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."	<b>24</b> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."
<b>26</b> Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"	<b>26</b> And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"	<b>25</b> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"
<b>27</b> But he said, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."	<b>27</b> Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."	<b>26</b> But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."
<b>28</b> And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you."	<b>28</b> Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you."	<b>27</b> Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"
<b>29</b> And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,	<b>29</b> Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,	<b>28</b> Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.
<b>30</b> who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."	<b>30</b> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.	<b>29</b> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.
<b>Luke 13:30</b> And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."	<b>31</b> But many who are first will be last, and the last first."	<b>30</b> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

Of course, it begins famously, “**Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” (**Luke 18:18**). All three Gospels have **the same basic question**. This question is the key that Protestants first grasped, are rapidly losing, and which Catholics rarely want to discuss. For example, the *Reformation Study Bible* says, “**The two verbs ‘do’ and ‘inherit’ placed together, the list of moral achievements, and the young man’s understanding of goodness (v. 18 note) indicate a religious outlook based on works righteousness**” [italics mine].<sup>10</sup> Calvin says, “**He does not simply ask how and by what means he shall reach life, but what good thing he shall do, in order to obtain it. He therefore dreams of merits, on account**

<sup>10</sup> **R. C. Sproul**, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL; Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), Mark 10:17 (p. 1434).

of which he may receive *eternal life* as a reward due; and therefore Christ appropriately sends him to the keeping of the law, which unquestionably is the way of *life*” [italics original].<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to avoid this conclusion, unless you avoid the question, which is what the two main Catholic Study Bibles do, skipping entirely over what he must “do” to “inherit eternal life” *in all three Gospel commentaries*, so six different opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

But could there be **any more important question to ask** at the beginning than, “**What is this guy actually asking Jesus?**” If you deliberately avoid the question, how can you possibly understand anything that comes after it the right way? Yes, we must start here, because what we see is an ancient example of **a man confusing the law and the gospel**. The more things change, the more things stay the same. He thinks that by his works, by what he does, by his obedience, he can inherit eternal life. That’s his point. I’ll do something

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<sup>11</sup> **John Calvin** and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 393.

<sup>12</sup> **Donald Senior**, John J. Collins, and Mary Ann Getty, eds., *The Catholic Study Bible, 2nd Ed.: Notes*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Curtis Mitch, “Introduction to the Gospels,” in *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010).

to inherit the kingdom. What must I do? If this is your question, then you must pay special attention to what follows, because Jesus is talking directly to you.

## Why Do You Call Me Good and “Be Like Mike” Theology

As we saw last time though, **Jesus does not at first answer the man’s question**. Instead, he asks him a more basic question, “**Why do you call me good?**” (19). You might think this is some kind of a bunny trail question, or that Jesus doesn’t want to answer, but it isn’t. What we “do” is related to the law. Calling Jesus “good” is also related to the law. If this man is calling Jesus “good,” and he thinks he can do something to inherit eternal life, then it seems that he is implying that he can be like Jesus.

In the 1980s, there was the commercial, “**Be like Mike.**” The first several scenes are plays of the greatest baller in history in his prime. (And don’t let anyone ever tell you LeBron is better. That’s laughable.) Air Jordan dunking, crossing over and making people miss badly, shooting Championship winning shots with the greatest of ease. Then ordinary average people dreaming that they can someday be like Mike.

Of course, they can't. *But they can drink the same Gatorade!* It's pretty ridiculous, actually, but it sold tons of Pepsi's Yellow #5 sugar water.

Throughout Christian history, people have also thought they can **be like Jesus**, which is even more ridiculous. That's the way people often take **1 Peter 2:21**, "**Leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.**" Views of the atonement such as the Moral Example view of the Socinians and Pelagians, entire books such as *In His Steps*, and Evangelical fads like the WWJD bracelets have all to one degree or another seized on the idea that we can be like Jesus. And, of course, God does want this. But it must all be understood properly for people to not get utterly confused, allowed to continue thinking that in their own nature, they could ever be like him.

Jesus tells the man, "**No one is good except God alone.**" Why did Jesus say this? That's **the second great question of our passage**. Listen to these totally different answers. The Catholic Study Bible says, "**Jesus repudiates the term 'good' for himself and directs it to God, the source of all goodness**

who alone can grant the gift of eternal life; cf. Mt 19:16–17.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, here’s Augustine,

The Father is good. The Son is good. The Holy Spirit is good. Still, there are not three goods but one good. He said, “No one is good except the one God.” The Lord Jesus Christ did not answer. He feared that the one who in addressing a man had said “good master” might understand him as only a man. He therefore did not say, “No one is good except the Father alone.” He rather said, “No one is good except the one God.” By the name *Father*, the Father makes himself known. The name *God* includes himself, as well as the Son and the Holy Spirit, because the Trinity is one God.

(AUGUSTINE, ON THE TRINITY 8)<sup>14</sup>

The Geneva notes are even shorter, but say the same thing. “Because commonly they abused this word, Jesus shows him that he could not confess him to be good except also he acknowledged that he was God” [spelling modernized].<sup>15</sup>

Is it a coincidence that the same notes that skip right over the man asking what he must “do” to inherit eternal life turn

<sup>13</sup> Donald Senior, John J. Collins, and Mary Ann Getty, eds., *The Catholic Study Bible, 2nd Ed.: Notes*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1420 [Mark 10:18].

<sup>14</sup> Arthur A. Just, *Luke*, vol. 3, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 3. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 283.

<sup>15</sup> *Geneva Bible: Notes*, vol. 2 (Geneva: Rovland Hall, 1560), 38 [Luke 18:19].

around and say that Jesus is not calling himself good? I'm not implying that Catholics do not believe that Jesus is God. Of course they do. But they do not believe that they are saved by faith alone, but rather by a cooperation of faith and works, similar to this rich young man. In denying that Jesus is talking about himself, they open the door to the man's question being answerable ... *by works!* Because, after all, if Jesus can get into the kingdom with some kind of attainable standard, so can we. But Jesus' point seems to be that he is equating himself with God and therefore, if you want to be like Jesus, you are going to have to attain deity, not merely be a relatively good (i.e. decent) person.

## The Law

Jesus quickly drops this point and *picks up where we thought he might have started*. If a man is asking what he must do, then it makes sense to talk about the Law. “*You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother’*” (**Luke 18:19**). These are essentially

the second table of the law—that is, the law of God addressing our neighbor, save for the last, coveting, which is a summary of them all and is not here. Luke’s order differs from Moses in two ways. He puts honoring parents at the end rather than the beginning, and he reverses adultery and murder (Mark has these two like Moses). We saw last time that Luke may have the order he does to reflect priority to family first, priority to parents last, and possessions in the middle. And we’ll come back to why this might matter later.

Interestingly, Matthew alone begins with Jesus saying, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Matt 19:17). It’s a kind of summary, and it very much works with where Matthew will take this. You might ask, where is he taking this? The answer lies in understanding that in Matthew, the man asks, “Which ones?” (18). This is not found in the other Gospel accounts. Why?

In Matthew, Jesus adds the summary law at the end of the five, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19). In other words, *keep them all*. Astonishingly, the man says with, I believe, no guile, “All these I have kept from my youth” (Luke 18:21). Why do I say he really meant it? Because in Mark, it says, “And Jesus, looking at him, *loved him*.” This is

not the response Jesus has when Pharisees talk like this. In fact, when the Lawyer who had nearly the identical exchange with Jesus back in the parallel in [Luke 10:25-28](#), said this to “[justify himself](#)” (29), Jesus tells him a brutal parable of his own hypocrisy. Nothing like that is here with this young ruler. He wasn’t trained in the law. He wasn’t a scribe or a lawyer or a Pharisee. He just listened to them too much. And sometimes, people can simply be unwittingly deceived. They’re still culpable, but they are deceived nonetheless, and not because they have some evil intent in such a thought.

But do you see what the man is saying? He is saying that [he hasn’t done anything meriting not entering](#) the kingdom. He hasn’t broken any of these laws. He’s kept them all. He needed to hear Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount to internalize his own betrayal of God’s laws in his heart, but Jesus gives him a short summary, personally applied instead.

“[When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’](#)” (22). There are several things worth noting here. [First](#), many people use this as some sort of proof-text that God demands Christians to be poor, as if this is said to everyone, rather

than to just this young ruler. In fact, entire Christian movements have been based off of this, including the desert Fathers living on poles and nearly all of the monastic movements of history. This isn't to say that taking a vow of poverty is a bad thing. It is to say that to insist that everyone be poor or a certain kind of people be poor because Jesus said to, is. All the more so when you do it in the name of the government stealing people's money to give to the rich, which is sometimes done, because that isn't even self-induced poverty, it is coerced poverty in the name of religion and politics.

**Second**, remember that this man is himself very rich. We've said this already, but no Gospel record tells you that until the next verse. Therefore, we don't technically know it just from reading to here. Nevertheless, this was the point of putting theft in the middle of the five commands. It centered on money, this man's problem.

**Third**, note the words "**follow me**." I made a point to show you how this is a theme of both the first and seventh long narratives in Luke's telling of Jesus' trip to Jerusalem. And we are going to see just how important this is to a

proper interpretation of our story a little bit later in something that escapes people who don't read the full context.

**Fourth**, it is important to add Matthew's addition here, as he is interested in highlighting something Luke and Mark do not. "Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess...'" (**Matt 19:21**). *Perfection*. That's why Matthew tells the story the way he does, with little flourishes not found in the others.

Now, throughout the OT use of this LXX word (*teleios*), it is translating words that have the idea of "wholeness" (*tammim*) or "peace" (*shalom*). Technically, it means "unblemished, undivided, complete, or whole."<sup>16</sup> And this seems to be the idea here. The man has divided loyalties. He is not yet "whole" in them. However, "perfect" is a great way to translate it, since any falling short of the commands is a kind of divided loyalty. But keep in mind, this is Jesus telling the man what he must "do" to inherit eternal life. That's the requirement. **Pure, undivided, total loyalty. Perfection**. This is not a doctrine made up by the Reformation with their law/gospel distinction. It's right here in the story of the Rich Young Ruler (among other places).

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<sup>16</sup> **Craig L. Blomberg**, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 28.

Many people still won't like my interpretation. However, we see that the man understood perfectly well. “**But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich**” (Luke 18:23). Now we finally see that he was in fact a *rich* young ruler. **One whom Jesus loved**. But that's still the inevitable consequences of trying to attain salvation through your works. Ultimately, the Law will find your weak spot. We all have them. Don't think that you don't. Each one of us has one or many and probably thousands, if we get down to the heart of the matter. But it's better to confess it this side of death than the other side, when it is too late.

Jesus' entire point is to show that what this man sought was in fact impossible. **Not hard**. Not **difficult**. Not **challenging**. Not **problematic**. Impossible. No one can do it, save Jesus—who alone is Good. But someone might protest. Doesn't it say, “**Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, ‘How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God?’**” (Luke 18:24). In fact, doesn't Matthew even say, “**Only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven**” (Matt 19:23).

Based on this, some have taken the next verse in a way entirely unheard of in the early church. “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25). “Difficult,” they say, “but not impossible.” Why? Perhaps you have heard the rumor that Jesus was referring here to a small gate called “the eye of the needle” that was supposedly inside the large double gate of a city wall through which pedestrians could enter without the need for the large gates to be opened as they would be for a camel train. So the idea here is that a camel *could* go through this smaller gate, but with difficulty. The problem is, there’s simply no evidence that there ever was such a gate.<sup>17</sup> The origin of this myth has recently been traced back to Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), a thousand years after Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Besides, Jesus is being just as literal as the Rabbis were when they taught that an elephant couldn’t go through the eye of a needle.<sup>19</sup> Jesus is giving a classic largest-smallest comparison in order to illustrate the impossible.

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<sup>17</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 738.

<sup>18</sup> Agnieszka Ziemińska, “[The Origin of the ‘Needle’s Eye Gate’ Myth: Theophylact or Anselm?](#)” *New Testament Studies* 68 (2022): 358-61.

<sup>19</sup> B. Ber. 55b; b. B. Mesi’a 38b; b. ‘Erub. 53a.

It's just that people don't want to think that what he is saying is impossible, so they go making stuff up to lessen his words.

But those who heard Jesus understood exactly what he was saying. “Then who can be saved” (Luke 18:26)? Exactly. They knew what he was saying. Matthew and Mark both add that they were all greatly and exceedingly astonished at this teaching. That's the emotion behind their question. In other words, they know full well that Jesus is teaching that no one can be saved this way. And this really bothered them, because that's what basically all the teachers of the law taught in those days. And therefore, that's what nearly everyone seemed to believe. The more things change...

And Jesus affirmed their thoughts. “But he said, ‘What is impossible with man...’” (Luke 18:27). Mark, “With man it is impossible” (Mark 10:27). Matthew, “With man this is impossible” (Matt 19:26). You get the point? It *is* impossible. That alone should tell you the wisdom about making the eye of a needle be something that is difficult but possible. Jesus says the opposite. You can't be saved this way. Only God is good. Not you. Not me. And that's the toll the law exacts. It levels us all.

# The Gospel

But where **with man it is impossible**, Jesus continues, it “**is possible with God**” (Luke). “**With God all things are possible**” (Matthew). “**All things are possible with God**” (Mark). *This is the Gospel*. It is the good news and it rests entirely outside of you. But it only can be received after the law has done its work on your heart. God gives us the law to show us not how great we are, but how helpless, how powerless, how unable we are to do what is needed to inherit eternal life. Still, God holds out the possibility of eternal life to all who hear. And he means to give it to his people. The possibility of the impossible. Why? Because of God. *Soli Deo Gloria!* To God alone be the glory!

Now, to impress this Gospel upon you, to show you exactly what we mean by the Gospel, I’m going to do **two things**. The first is to look at **the immediate context** of this story, especially its parallel unit in the literary structure. For this informs exactly what I said at the beginning about the *solas*. Doing this will root us firmly in *sola Scriptura*—the Scripture alone for our doctrine on the law and the gospel. The second will be to go to **an extra-biblical source**, but what

many scholars believe might just be one of the proto-texts that Mark actually used to write his Gospel, in fact, he may have written it himself. In doing this, it will reinforce, even if it is only by way of illustration—though I believe it is possible that it is more than an illustration I will be giving you—just what it means by the impossible being made possible.

### *Faith Alone in Christ Alone: The Blind Man in Jericho*

First, the **larger context of Luke's story**. Recall that last time we saw that this story is preceded by two stories of contrast. A **parable contrasting a Pharisee with a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14)**. Their prayers couldn't have been any more opposite. The Pharisee longed to be seen by men and to publicly thank God that he was not a sinner. The tax-collector, despised as much then as they are today, was off in a corner and wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven, because he was so aware of his own sinfulness and need for God's mercy. Jesus said that it was the tax-collector who went away "**justified**" before God. **Justified** by what? We'll see in a moment.

Second, there was a **contrast between infants or youngsters** that were being brought to Jesus **and his disciples**, who

rebuked the parents for daring to bother the Master (15-17). If you will not receive the kingdom of God like a child, you will not enter it. What is child-like faith? It is that implicit faith that simply receives that you are their father or mother. Woe to the one who ruins a child-like faith in God because they don't believe them or they think they couldn't possibly have the faith that is needed. If they profess, and are not a heretic, then believe them. Jesus says we must have their faith, not visa-versa. Perhaps I just gave away what we are justified by? For, though the text does not use the word "faith" here, surely this is what it implies.

Let us now turn to what comes immediately after what we have read in our story, for this will prove it. First, we have Peter boldly telling Jesus, "See, we have left our homes and followed you" (28). Notice the word "follow" again. It will become important in a moment. Jesus promises that if indeed you follow him and left house, wife, brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, you will receive many times more both in this age and in the age to come—eternal life (29-30). This is the promise of the Gospel that most of us need so that we will not think that

following Jesus is simply a suicide mission. It might even be, but the rewards are eternal, unlike anything in this life.

Next, we see that Jesus suddenly starts telling them that **the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem** so that everything written about him in the prophets might be accomplished (31). These things include being delivered over to the Gentiles, being mocked and shamefully treated and spat upon (32). Jesus didn't withhold from himself the very suffering that he knows his disciples will endure. He is **the Suffering Servant**, the very embodiment of the solution of the problem of evil. God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.

This treatment will result in him being **flogged and killed** (33), and even **rise from the dead**, but they **understood none of this** (34), for **it was hidden from them**. Why? To make sure it happened. If they had understood, he never would have been put to death. His death would be an **atoning sacrifice** that takes away our sin. It would include **a defeat of Satan** and Jesus' **taking the believing captives of Sheol to heaven** in his resurrection. His resurrection would itself **give us the very life of God**, the miracle that becomes the firstfruits that makes the impossible possible.

It is only after this that we learn about a **blind man** from Jericho (35). This man, as loathsome a fellow as the tax collector, heard a ruckus on the street outside the city and wanted to know what it meant (36). “**Jesus of Nazareth is passing by**” (37), he was told. Suddenly, he cries out, “**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**” (38). This is **Jesus’ kingly title**. The blind man believes Jesus is the long awaited King. No one else in this Gospel has thus far used this title. He’s the first one. A blind beggar from a pagan city destroyed by God in the wars of Joshua.

The people in front of him **rebuked him** and told him to shut up (39). Sometimes that’s a great way to put it, for it shows the evil of their hearts. But he cried out all the more! Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him (40). When he came near, he said, “**What do you want me to do for you?**” “**Lord, let me recover my sight**” (41). And Jesus said, “**Recover your sight; *your faith* has made you well.**” (42). Before he receives his sight, the blind man sees. The impossible is made possible by God. How? By works? No, but by faith. Faith like a child. Faith that is the gift of God (Eph 2:8-9). This man was **justified by faith**. Not by works,

like the rich man wanted. This is Luke's deliberate contrasting this story to that one. This man did absolutely nothing except cry out to Jesus to make him well. That's all he did. There was nothing else he could do. He was blind.

But once he saw it says, “**And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God**” (Luke 18:43). **He followed him.** Who? Christ. *Christ alone.* This is the link back to Peter who followed, but also to the rich young ruler who would not follow Jesus because he was too wealthy to sell *all* he had and follow the Master. It could not be *Christ alone*. No, to work his way to heaven would cost him too much.

Do you see how **the pairing of stories** juxtaposes works righteousness with faith alone? The rich young ruler asked the wrong question. For it, he got the only answer that works salvation can receive: the impossible. But faith receives the good news of the impossible, for everything is possible with God, even recovering your sight through God's gift of Christ.

### *Grace Alone in Christ Alone*

**The second story** I want to take you to may be something you've never heard or don't remember ever hearing at

best. It comes from something called **the Secret Gospel of Mark**. Here's a little history of this document.

Though the title sounds like it would probably be part of a collection of Gnostic Gospels, and by our source for this document's own admission, it ended up *being used that way* by people who got hold of the manuscript and deliberately miscopied it, scholars generally believe today that, if it was genuine, it was either **a contemporary Gospel** used by or even written by Mark,<sup>20</sup> or a very early Gospel written in Markan style by someone else.<sup>21</sup> Rediscovered only in 1958 by Morton Smith in the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba in the Judean desert, halfway between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea (only about 14 miles south of Jericho), the incomplete letter claims to be from Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215 AD). The Clementine corpus is full of letters like these, so that's nothing unusual. But scholars are skeptical as to whether Morton Smith himself or the 18<sup>th</sup> century copiest

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<sup>20</sup> **Morton Smith**, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., 1973), as purported in the letter itself.

<sup>21</sup> **Raymond E. Brown**, *The Death of the Messiah, Volume 1 and 2: From Gethsemane to the Grave, a Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York: Yale University Press, 1994), 296-97.

forged the letter, or if it is actually original to Clement.<sup>22</sup> Many think it is original.<sup>23</sup>

The text comes as a letter from Clement to one Theodore, supporting his opposition to the gnostic sect the Carpocratians. Apparently, this sect used a copy of the Secret Gospel of Mark which it then completely falsified by “**mixing the most shameless lies and the undefiled and holy words**” with Mark’s original.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Clement acknowledged that there were **two authoritative editions of Mark’s Gospel** at his time. One was **the public edition** which was composed by Mark, using his own and Peter’s notes, while Peter was in Rome, and this appears to be the same Gospel of Mark we have today.

The other is **a Secret Gospel of Mark**, “**a more spiritual gospel**” for sanctification of both life and knowledge. He says that when Mark died, he left a copy of the Secret Gospel

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<sup>22</sup> For more see **Marvin W. Meyer**, “Mark, Secret Gospel of,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 559.

<sup>23</sup> On the debate see the essays in **Tony Burke** (ed.), *Ancient Gospel or Modern Forgery? The Secret Gospel of Mark in Debate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> **Important note.** What I’m going to propose in what follows, I do as anti-a-Gnostic a person can be. But that doesn’t mean I won’t read them or try to understand them, which is precisely what Clement was doing. That said, just like the Secret Gospel of Mark was coopted by the Carpocratian Gnostics, so also the following story line has been discovered and written about mostly (not entirely) by modern Gnostics. So for example, see **Andrew Welburn**, *The Beginnings of Christianity: Essene Mystery, Gnostic Revelation and the Christian Vision* (Floris Books, 2004), as discussed in **Edward Reaugh Smith**, “The Secret Gospel of Mark,” in *The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved* (Anthroposophic Press, 2000), see especially n. 1.

in the hands of the church at Alexandria, which was even in his day “carefully guarded.” But somehow, the heretic infiltrated the church and one of the monks gave him a copy, and he started adding things that Mark had not put in the Gospel. Among what he says were many lies that Theodore was inquiring about, two stories found in the Gospel *were original* to Mark and could be trusted.

The first is to be located immediately after **Mark 10:34** and recounts the story of the raising of a rich youth of Bethany.

And they came to Bethany and there was one woman there whose brother had died. And she came and worshipped Jesus and said to him, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” And the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, becoming angry, went away with her into the garden where the tomb was, and immediately a loud sound was heard from the tomb, and Jesus approached and rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb, and immediately entering where the youth was, he reached out his hand and raised him and grasped his hand, and the youth, seeing him, loved him and began to request of him that he might be with him. And coming out of the

tomb, he went into the house of the youth, for he was wealthy. And after six days, Jesus commanded him, and when it was evening, the youth came to him wearing nothing but a robe. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. From there, he rose and returned to the other side of the Jordan.<sup>25</sup>

Now, **Mark 10:34** follows immediately after Jesus predicting his death which follows right after the **Rich Young Ruler** story in Mark's Gospel (just like Luke's). This puts this "Secret Gospel of Mark" story in the exact position that the **Blind Man** story holds in Luke. That's fascinating itself, given all the parallels both with the Blind Man ("Son of David," a miraculous healing, etc.) and the rich young ruler. For, indeed, this man who was raised is also rich and young.

Secret Gospel of Mark with Gospel of Mark	Luke's Gospel
Teaching about Divorce (10:1-12)	
Let the Children Come (13-16)	Let the Children Come (Luke 18:15-17)
Rich Young Man (17-31)	Rich Young Ruler (18-30)
Jesus Foretells His Death (32-34)	Jesus Foretells His Death (31-34)
[Jesus Raises the Rich Young Man] Request of James and John (35-45) Jesus Heals the Blind Beggar Bartimaeus (46-52)	Jesus Heals a Blind Beggar (35-43)
	Jesus and Zacchaeus (19:1-10)
	Parable of Ten Minas (11-27)
Triumphal Entry (11:1ff)	Triumphal Entry (28ff)

<sup>25</sup> A. K. M. Adam, *Fragment of the Letter of Clement to Theodore Containing the Secret Gospel of Mark: A Study Edition* (Oxford: Quadriga, 2018), 6, 8.

But the thing is, this story bears such a close relationship to **the raising of Lazarus** in John's Gospel, that they appear to be the same story. Bethany is where Martha, Martha, and Lazarus lived (**John 11:1**). When Jesus finally arrives and Lazarus has died, he meets with Martha (**20ff.**). He is only one we know by name "**whom Jesus loved**" (**3; 5**), which is precisely what is said of this rich young ruler (**Mark 10:21**; the Secret Gospel says his raised man now loved him).<sup>26</sup>

**For the sake of argument** and to make my point through this story, let's assume that the Rich Young Ruler is in fact Lazarus. The timeline as I've put it forward from the stories in Luke's Gospel would seem to be something like this. Jesus is down in Jerusalem for **the winter feasts** (**John 10:20**) and he stops at some point at Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' house (**Luke 10:38-42**) where Martha is troubled about many things (**41**). Does she suspect something isn't right with her

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<sup>26</sup> Let us recall that those who see Lazarus as the beloved disciple in John's Gospel include **B. Grey Griffith**, "**The Disciple whom Jesus Loved**," *ExpTim* 32 (1920-21): 379-81; **Robert Eisler**, *The Enigma of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Methuen, 1938); **Floyd V. Filson**, "**Who Was the Beloved Disciple?**" *JBL* 68 (1949): 83-88; **Joseph N. Sanders**, "**Those Whom Jesus Loved (John XI, 5)**," *NTS* 1 (1954-55): 29-41; **J. N. Sanders**, "**Who Was the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved?**" in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. L. Cross (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1957), 72-83; **Ben Witherington**, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 141-56; "Was Lazarus the Beloved Disciple," presented at the SBL 2006, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/01/was-lazarus-beloved-disciple.html>; **J. Phillips**, *The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2010); **Pablo S. Muñoz**, "**New Insights in the Search for the Identity of the 'Beloved Disciple'**," *Academia* (March 6, 2012). See also **Charlesworth**, *The Beloved Disciple*, 185-92.

brother and isn't telling anyone? Luke presents this in the Journey to Jerusalem, but we know this is actually in Bethany (unless it is a completely different Mary and Martha sister-pair), so he is clearly moving the story from its original geography to fit a literary design. My guess is, he returns to this moment now.

Mark says Jesus was setting out “on his journey” (Mark 10:17) as he introduces the Rich Young Ruler. As he leaves, Lazarus comes to him and wonders about what he must do to inherit eternal life.<sup>27</sup> But, he goes away sad, and Jesus loved him anyway. Over the next couple of months, things take a dark turn for Lazarus, who gets very sick and dies. At some point on his journey back to Jerusalem, probably near its end, Jesus gets word and waits a handful of days until Lazarus has been dead and is stinking in the tomb. Finally, Jesus arrives back in Bethany where he is confronted with the distraught sister Martha. He raises Lazarus who comes out of the tomb only wearing the linen strips and face wrappings of a dead man (John 11:44). This happens just before he enters Jerusalem.

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<sup>27</sup> Recall that I said the Lazarus and the Rich Man “parable” is actually a subversive story that changes some of the real-life circumstances, including making Lazarus poor, when he was actually rich. We’ll see why shortly.

Imagine if the Rich Young Ruler is in fact Lazarus. He has to be someone, and Jesus loved him, so why not? This would certainly help us see why Jesus is not angry at this man nor does he view him antagonistically, as he does the Pharisees. Further, this would mean that through the miracle of resurrection, a rich man *could* inherit the kingdom, as we, of course, see with other rich men in the Scripture, especially the Zacchaeus story just a few verses later in Luke.

His death and what happened to him has **utterly changed him** and his attitude about working his way to eternal life is undone. He has now experienced just how impossible this is.<sup>28</sup> But now that he is back from the dead, he understands the gospel. Curiously, **Mark(!) alone records** a fascinating little line at that moment when Peter cuts off the man's ear after Jesus is arrested that when everyone else had fled, "**a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked**" (**Mark 14:50-51**). This little piece of information, which has been so greatly speculated upon in many

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<sup>28</sup> Again, simply remember the previous footnote. Just because Jesus has Lazarus in Abraham's bosom in the story, it doesn't mean he went there. It was a story with several of the true facts already changed. If what I'm saying is correct, and Lazarus died in the state of sadness, not comprehending the Gospel, then he would have gone to the same place the "rich man" went in the story. Ironic in so many ways.

ways throughout church history, finds a remarkable parallel with this Secret Gospel of Mark story and the whole idea I presented before that Lazarus is the source of John's Gospel material. If this story is to be trusted, this man was almost certainly Lazarus.

Lazarus may have actually ended up giving everything away, perhaps selling all he had, and following Jesus to the very end, but whatever the case, though he went away sad here, because it was impossible for him to merit eternal life, the grace of God intruded into his life—and death—and gave him eternal life completely apart from his works, for he was literally dead. Has there ever been a story so grand? Only one, and it will occur just a few weeks from this very day.

In this way, both from the immediate context of Luke and the larger history of Mark and John's Gospels, we have stories of faith alone and grace alone, both in Christ alone that show us this true power of God over our own inability to save ourselves by our works. And this is the definition of the good news. For where man is unable, God is able. Where man is incompetent, God is not only competent, but willing and powerful to step in. It was his plan all along, so that to

him be **the glory alone**. Even though he originally gave us the Law as a means whereby we might gain eternal life, he always knew that we would fail. This too was to his glory, and to the glory of Christ, so that God might send Jesus as a man to do what we could not, so that he might, through Christ and through faith in Christ, give us the power to inherit eternal life without doing a thing—indeed, in spite of us doing plenty of bad things.

This is why it is so important to **get the basic questions** of the Rich Young Ruler story **right** from the start. It is why it is so important that we understand the proper **distinctions between law and gospel**. In both of these things, seeing what the story is about shines the spotlight both on our inability and God's ability. God does this so that you, in hearing this good news, **might come to life** like Lazarus, have your entire world turned upside-down—for the better, with new affections, new desires, as new creations that are finally able to follow Christ, not to gain eternal life, but because God has already given it to you by a gift of his grace.

If you hear this story correctly, then you realize that **there's nothing you can do to merit God's favor**. It is impossible. But with God, all things are possible, even life from

death and eternity out of the limited temporal existence that is our dust in the wind existence. See Jesus. Know his power, both to save and to sanctify, to justify and to bring you to glory. Come to life anew and you will, by faith, like the Blind Man and the Lazarus, follow Jesus where once it was impossible.

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