

BUT, WITH GOD

Matthew 19:16-26

Matthew 19:16–26 (2022 LSB) — **16** And behold, someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” **17** And He said to him, “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.” **18** Then he *said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “YOU SHALL NOT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; **19** HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” **20** The young man *said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” **21** Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” **22** But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property. **23** And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. **24** “And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” **25** And when the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” **26** And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

THE QUESTION

Matthew 19:16

Matthew 19:16 (2022 LSB) — **16** And behold, someone came to Him and said, “**Teacher**, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?”

“Good thing” is singular. This man has enough of a conscience to realize he has a problem: he doesn’t have eternal life. But he is convinced there is ONE good thing that will change his destiny. He is greatly underestimating the holiness of God.

Jesus says,

Matthew 5:48 (2022 LSB) — 48 “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

God judges people by His own holiness and righteousness. Measuring up to His standard isn't a matter of doing one good thing.

This young man also greatly overestimates his own ability. He is convinced that there is a good thing that God requires and that if he knew what it was, he would be able to do it. He is not coming to Jesus for salvation or even for help; he just wants some information.

TRANSITION: Jesus knows exactly how to respond to him.

KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS

Matthew 19:17

Matthew 19:17 (2022 LSB) — 17 And He said to him, “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.”

Let's start with Jesus' immediate response: *Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only one who is good.* Only God is good. Now, Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, and so He actually was good in a way that no one could understand; I'm not sure WE understand just how good Jesus was. Jesus was infinitely good, the full and perfect expression of all that God is, including goodness. But this young man had no way of knowing that.

I think Jesus wants this man to understand that if you want to know what is good, you don't ask a man or woman. You ask the only One who is good – God. And God has already answered that question in His Word. “If you want to enter into life, keep the

commandments.”

We must keep the Word first in our lives.

Isaiah 8:20 (2022 LSB) — 20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word [if they do not direct you to the Scripture], it is because they have no dawn [they have no understanding].

God has spoken clearly and plainly. There is no ambiguity. There is no mystery. There is no need for complicated interpretations. Go to the Word. Keep the commandments.

TRANSITION: That’s pretty straightforward, isn’t it? Not to this man.

WHICH COMMANDMENTS?

Matthew 19:18

Matthew 19:18 (2022 LSB) — 18 Then he said to Him, “Which ones?”

This is a shocking thing for any Jew to say. Which ones?!? ALL of them. EVERY commandment. There are no peripheral commandments. The Law of God is not subdivided into “Absolutely Necessary,” “Pretty Important,” and “For Extra Credit.” Every commandment is necessary.

Psalms 119:160 (2022 LSB) — 160 The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments is everlasting. (See also **Psalms 119:151, 172**).

The sad truth is that the rabbis were far less concerned with what God had said in His Word than with what previous rabbis had said. They did not develop their teachings by carefully studying and pondering the Scriptures but by endless debate and argument with one another. It’s why on the Sabbath, it’s a sin for a beggar to reach into your doorway and take

something from your hand – that’s work – but it’s not a sin for a beggar to reach into your doorway and have you drop something into his hand. I am certainly not an expert in rabbinical practices, but I don’t think there was even one command of the Law where they said, “This commandment needs no debate, arguments, or discussion. Just obey it.”

But Jesus continually called people back to the written Word of God. “Have you not read?” He asked the scribes and Pharisees over and over again. He held them accountable for what the Word of God said, and which they had come to ignore for the sake of their traditions.

TRANSITION: Oh, how I love the grace of Jesus. He answers this man graciously.

THESE COMMANDMENTS

Matthew 19:18-19

Matthew 19:18–19 (2022 LSB) — 18 Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “YOU SHALL NOT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; **19** HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

Most of these are from the ten commandments. Jesus leaves out the first four commandments, those having to do with the worship of God. He names the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments and then quotes Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus left out the tenth commandment, which says, “You shall not covet.” He’s not confused or mistaken. This was deliberate. We have to remember that Jesus is God in human flesh. Jesus possesses omniscience, the knowledge of everything that is knowable, including this man’s heart and sins. His question will unmask this young man’s dead, sinful heart.

TRANSITION: That wasn't for the Lord's benefit; He already knew. It was for the young man's benefit so that he would know the depth of his own sin. This man thinks eternal life hinges on doing one good thing. Jesus gives him a good look at himself.

A DECEPTIVE HEART

Matthew 19:20

Matthew 19:20 (2022 LSB) — 20 The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept [‘from my youth,’ Mark and Luke add]; what am I still lacking?”

Yes, he actually said that he had kept the commandments of God and said it – apparently – with a straight face. Two things are at work here.

First of all, Jeremiah 17:9 tells us the real state of this man's heart:

Jeremiah 17:9 (2022 LSB) — 9 “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can know it?”

So yes, of course, he approves of his own life; we all do, and for the same reason: we are deceived by our own sinful hearts.

But we also see the impact of human religion and false doctrine. The Jews had reduced a living, dynamic relationship with Yahweh down to a formalistic system. This man had been well taught and successfully gained the approval of his fellow man.

TRANSITION: Praise God, and all glory to the Spirit of God, his conscience still pains him. For all his successes, he was not at peace; something was missing. But between deceptive religion and his own deceptive heart, he thinks he's just missing one last good thing. For reasons we could never know for sure, he doesn't take the hint and guess that covetousness is an issue. But Jesus isn't done with him.

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?

Matthew 19:21-24

Matthew 19:21 (2022 LSB) — 21 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

Jesus could have simply clearly labeled the man’s sin and *told* him he was covetous. Maybe the man would have accepted it; maybe he would have denied it. Instead, Jesus *shows* him his sin: “go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor. Then you’ll have treasure in heaven and be free to follow Me.”

This young man might have argued a direct statement – “you are covetous” – but he can’t argue with the evidence.

Matthew 19:22 (2022 LSB) — 22 But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.

It turns out the young man didn’t want to be complete after all. He wanted to know what good thing he could do to have eternal life. Jesus told him, and he was unwilling to do that one good thing. On the outside, he was just a young man. On the inside, he was like Charles Dickens’s description of Ebenezer Scrooge, “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner.”

Jesus knows exactly what he is going through. He watches him walk away and then says to his disciples,

Matthew 19:23–24 (2022 LSB) — 23 ... “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. **24** And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Hard? No. Impossible. Camel-through-the-eye-of-a-needle impossible. There’s an old myth that Jesus was talking about a gate in Jerusalem that was so small camels would have to crawl through it on their knees. That myth says that it’s possible but very, very hard. But no such “narrow” gate existed in Jerusalem. If they had, no one would ever make a camel crawl through a gate on its knees. Jesus’ point is not just that it’s hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven, but that it’s impossible.

Everyone sins in many ways. Some of our sins might be once-in-a-lifetime sins or very rare sins. Some might be infrequent. But in the life of an unbeliever, sin can become defining. First Corinthians 6:9-10 describes some who will not inherit the Kingdom of God. They are not merely people who COMMIT certain sins but people who ARE the sins they commit.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 (2022 LSB) — 9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, **10** nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

TRANSITION: This man realized how powerless he was over his own life. He owned many possessions – actually, those possessions owned him – and in the end, he was unwilling to give up his sin because it was his identity. That’s a grim realization for him and for others watching it take place.

BUT, WITH GOD

Matthew 19:25-26

Matthew 19:25–26 (2022 LSB) — 25 And when the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” **26** And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

The disciples' question reveals the assumption of their culture that people were rich because God had blessed them and therefore approved of them. If it's impossible for the rich to be saved, then what hope do the rest of us have?

Well, there's no hope, actually. With people, it is impossible. No one gets themselves into heaven. No earthly circumstance allows a sinner to get into God's presence. There is no personal achievement that can cancel out our sin and guilt.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote,

Jeremiah 32:17 (2022 LSB) — 17 “Ah Lord Yahweh! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You”

What thing is not too difficult for Yahweh?

Jeremiah 32:18 (2022 LSB) — 18 who shows lovingkindness to thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty God. Yahweh of hosts is His name,

Saving sinners is not too difficult for God. Neither is judging sinners.

Jesus is not saying that with God, we can earn salvation. He is saying that God can save anyone He likes, even us.

BRINGING IT HOME

In the end, the issue is not what someone owns but what owns them. We are all born as slaves of sin – owned by sin. We are powerless to free ourselves. To be honest, most people

normalize sin so that it's just the way things are. "Nobody's perfect," they say. "To err is human." Yes, but God is perfect, and He never makes mistakes.

His judgment is perfect and pure and unavoidable. We have only one hope: that God will save us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Heaven is out of our reach. Praise God, we were not out of Christ's reach.

We can not cleanse ourselves, but the Son of God could take our sins and guilt upon Himself.

We can not live in righteousness, but the Son of God could take on human flesh, live a sinless life, and earn perfect righteousness.

We can not earn God's pleasure, but we can receive it by faith in Jesus Christ.

Keep these truths in your mind as we move into the Christmas season.