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Sermons on Matthew

An Unattainable Quest

Matthew 19:16-26

With Study Questions

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Now behold, one came and said to Him, “_Good _Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?_”

⁻¹⁷⁻ So He said to him, “_Why do you call Me good? _No one is _good but One, *that is*, God. But if you want to enter into life, _keep the commandments._”

⁻¹⁸⁻ He said to Him, “_Which ones?_”

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 your mother,‘_’ and, _‘_You shall love your neighbor as yourself.‘_’_”

⁻²⁰⁻ The young man said to Him, “_All these things I have _kept _from my youth. What do I still lack?_”

⁻²¹⁻ Jesus said to him, “_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._”

⁻²²⁻ But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

⁻²³⁻ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “_Assuredly, I say to you that _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⁻ When His disciples heard *it*, they were greatly astonished, saying, “_Who then can be saved?_”

⁻²⁶⁻ But Jesus looked at *them* and said to them, “_With men this is impossible, but _with God all things are possible._” (Matthew 19:16-26)

Introduction

So what brings you here today? Perhaps you’re already a Christian and you’ve come to honor and worship God—you’ve come seeking a deeper understanding of God’s love for you with a conviction to walk more firmly in His precepts—you’ve come to meet Christ, to learn of Him from His word and to feed on Him through the sacraments; you want to be a faithful Christian.

A faithful church should be seeking to present Jesus in word and sacrament. So in a certain sense when you come to church, you’re coming to

Jesus—to His body—to the means by which He has chosen to present Himself to mankind, since He is no longer walking the earth, having ascended to the Father.

So assuming (and this certainly is our goal) by coming to church, you're coming to Christ, what brings you to Jesus? The gospels reveal many people from various stations in life coming to Christ. We see the destitute, the disenfranchised, the heart-broken, the infirmed, the ignorant, those mired in their own sin weeping at the feet of Jesus seeking redemption and finding it (Luke 7:36-50).

But we also see the arrogant coming to Christ. We see the sophists coming to Christ. We see those who are wise in their own eyes and confident in their own righteousness coming to Christ seeking to debunk and discredit Him. The frustrations of their failures will bring homicide to their hearts, and they will conspire to have Him crucified.

But the man we read of today is quite unique when it comes to records of encounters with Jesus. He is neither destitute (like the blind or the degenerate) nor is he overtly arrogant (like the Pharisees); he is somewhat exceptional. Yet I think there are few examples in the gospels that come closer to emulating the modern western mentality of the way men seek to approach God than the example of this young, wealthy ruler (cf. Mark 10:17-27; Luke 18:18-27).

Now behold, one came and said to Him, __“_Good __Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?_” (Matthew 19:16)

What Good Might I Do?

This man was rich (verse 22), young (verse 20), prominent (a ruler, perhaps of a local synagogue [Luke 18:18]), clean and moral (verse 20), reverent (verse 16; Mark 10:17 indicates he knelt before Jesus), and well brought up (verse 20). He was a regular Eagle Scout. It would seem he had a lot of “good things” to offer.

The destitute, the needy, the impoverished and the sinful would approach Christ with nothing and walk away with everything. This man would approach Jesus with everything and walk away with nothing. There was something that eluded him, something his riches, youth and prominence could not provide: assurance of eternal life. He did not have the peace of **“the love of God shed abroad”** in his heart through the Holy Spirit (cf. **Romans 5:5b KJV**).

This man was no Sadducee. He knew there was a hereafter. He knew there was an eternal peace in another world, but only for those prepared for it in this world. He came to Jesus seeking that peace, seeking that life and (at least as far as this record goes—we don't know of his eventual outcome) not finding it.

What type of encounter with Jesus leaves a person sorrowful? It would seem that it is the type of encounter which finds the person negotiating for their salvation. Augustus Toplady's *Rock of Ages*, which wouldn't be written for another 1,776¹ years, is not a hymn this young man was ready to sing:

In my hand no price I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.

No, he preferred to negotiate for his salvation and Jesus would accommodate him; at least it would appear such.

So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

⁻¹⁸⁻ He said to Him, “Which ones?”

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 your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

⁻²⁰⁻ The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” (Matthew 19:17-20)

Be Good

In Greek, Jesus' response sounds something like, **“Why me you ask about the good? One is the good (likely referring to God)”**. Jesus is going to preface His answer by telling this young man that no one is good but God, then He is going to tell Him that if he wants eternal life to be good. It would appear that Jesus is seeking to move this conversation in a different direction.

Let's appreciate this: If I ask what good thing I must do to have eternal life and Jesus begins His answer by telling me that no one is good but God (assuming I'm not God) then tells me to be good, at very least my next question should be, “what do you mean?”

¹ Actually probably about 1747 years (but it was written in 1776).

But people can become blinded by confidence in their own ethical capabilities—and blind is putting it gently—perhaps more accurately put, people are dead in their confidence in their own goodness. Confidence in your own goodness before God is a sign that you are dead in your trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

Hear the answer of Jesus: He doesn't say, "If you want to enter eternal life." He says, "**But if you want to enter into life.**" Eternal life is not continuing in your natural state forever, as if Christianity is some sort of Ponce De Leon Fountain of Youth. That would be better understood as eternal death. This young man was asking about eternal life and Jesus responds by speaking of life, period. This young man was dead. It's like M. Night Shyamalan's movie *The Sixth Sense*—people are dead and they don't know it.

Keep the Law

But the law of God is designed to remedy that ignorance. Jesus tells the young man to keep the commandments. He asks which ones because the law of God had been continually toyed with by the clergy of the day. Jesus appeals to the only true and absolute standard of righteousness, the Ten Commandments. We can only guess why Jesus merely mentions the second half of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). Calvin's opinion is that

"...as the observation of the first is often feigned by hypocrites, the second table is better adapted for making a scrutiny."

In other words, it's easier to fake loving God than it is to fake loving our neighbor (at least temporarily), because our neighbor is more apt to immediately point out our faults.

Either way, the young man wanted to know "what good thing" he must do and Jesus tells him to keep the Ten Commandments. Keeping the Ten Commandments means obeying in thought, word and deed every jot and tittle of the law; one ill deed, one stray thought, one unseemly word means death eternal.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, _"*Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.*" (Galatians 3:10).

So how does the law remedy the ignorance of spiritual death? Paul, who wrote Galatians, also wrote Romans and gives his own personal testimony of how the law worked in his life.

__I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, __“_You shall not covet.” (Romans 7:7b)

Coveting was apparently the one that did Paul in. But notice the language he uses.

-I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, _which was to bring life, I found to bring death. ⁻¹¹⁻ For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. (Romans 7:9-11)

Plainly put, a good honest look at the law of God and a genuine, accurate introspection of self works together like an MRI or X-Ray machine revealing a spiritual heart that is simply not beating. In other words, **“by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20b)**. And anyone with true spiritual insight certainly would not give the response we hear from this young man which was **“All these things I have __kept __from my youth.”** He doesn’t know that he’s dead.

“What do I still lack?” the young man asks. The answer is **“Everything, you lack everything.”** But sometimes people need to learn things the hard way. Jesus would lay a burden upon the shoulders of this young man that we seldom see anywhere in Scripture:

Jesus said to him, “_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.” (Matthew 19:21)_

Pressing Obedience

Jesus didn’t ask this of any of His apostles. We certainly don’t see this as the norm for discipleship. But Jesus wasn’t applying this as a universal norm for those who would follow Him, it was His way of revealing a concealed vice. He would press this young man’s obedience to its point of failure. I think of how easy that would be for Jesus to do that with me—not

to downplay the value of repentance and obedience. Obedience to the word of Christ is truly the fruit of genuine faith.

He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Hebrews 5:9b).

But He didn't become the author of our salvation *because* we obey Him. There are numerous sores on which Jesus can place His finger which easily serve to manifest the limitations of our sinful hearts. With this young man, as the text reveals, it was his riches.

But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions (Matthew 19:22).

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “_Assuredly, I say to you that __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._” (Matthew 19:23, 24)

A Universal Obstacle

It would not be very insightful of us to view riches as the solitary obstacle between man and heaven. Certainly **“the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10b)**. Some manuscripts of Mark's record of this event read **“...how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:24)**. Be that as it may, a comment Jesus will soon make informs us of the universal inability of man when it comes to entering the kingdom of heaven.

Eye of a Needle

You will sometimes hear **“the eye of the needle”** here as if it were referring to a certain gate in the city which the camel could pass through but only with great difficulty. Two responses: 1) The Greek *rhaphidos*, was a sewing needle, *not* a small gate within another gate as is sometimes suggested²; 2) The conclusion Jesus is seeking to make by the use of this metaphor is one of impossibility (verse 26).

²Walvoord, J. F. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Mt 19:23). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

So even if you're suggesting making a sort of camel pate that you could squeeze through the eye of a sewing needle, it was against the conclusion drawn by Jesus Himself. In a phrase, 'you can't do it.'

-When His disciples heard *it*, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁶- But Jesus looked at *them* and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:25, 26)

Who Can Be Saved?

Who then can be saved? This might have been a good question for the rich young ruler to have stayed around and asked. The disciples are astonished! There is little doubt that none of these disciples would have considered themselves as righteous and as full of character as the man who just walked away in sorrow. Riches were viewed as a blessing from God, yet Jesus is saying they become a barrier to heaven.

"If this man doesn't have what it takes" they no doubt were wondering, "then who does?" The answer? Nobody!

For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

This verse, "**with God all things are possible**" which is so often used to explain why the Christians on one football team defeated the Christians on the other football team or how we overcame our addictions or gained prosperity and success and so on, is actually set against the impossibility of contributing even the slightest particle to our own redemption, including faith itself which is a gift from God.

To approach Jesus with the question, "What good thing must I do to be saved?" is to embark upon an unattainable quest. I believe the following is a profound, accurate and biblical credo:

We believe that man was created in the image and likeness of God, but that the whole human race fell in the sin of the first Adam, and apart from Christ is spiritually dead and lost. We believe that no degree of reformation however great, no attainment in morality however high, no culture however attractive, no humanitarian and philanthropic schemes and

societies however useful, no baptism or other ordinance however administered, can help the sinner to take even one step toward heaven; but a new nature imparted from God, a new life implanted by the Holy Spirit and God given faith in the justifying blood of Jesus Christ alone is absolutely essential to salvation. (Genesis 1:26; 3:6; John. 3:3-8,16,18,36; 14:6; Romans 3:10-12,23; 5:12; 6:23; II Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1-5; Titus 3:5).

Conclusion

People can and should rightly be called to repent; to take up their cross and follow Jesus; to count the cost; to have faith. But let us not present these things as trophies we wave before God—as meritorious works to which God must respond to by saving us.

This particular man came to Jesus holding his righteousness in his hand and Jesus pressed him to the fullest degree of his own standard and he went away sorrowful. It is certainly my prayer that none leave sorrowful today?

We do not set the terms of our own salvation and we ought to praise God for it. For the grace of God extends beyond our inclinations and innovations. The answer my friends is not a “what” but a “whom”. We do not come to Jesus asking the way, for He Himself is the way. We do not ask what we must do but put our faith in what He has done. When we, with a genuine eye to repentance, cast our souls and cares upon Christ, He grants life everlasting.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you think people go to church? Why do you go to church? What should church be (pages 2, 3)?
2. What was unique about the rich young ruler? What was he lacking (page 3)?
3. What was the young ruler’s initial error in his question (page 4)?
4. Apart from trusting in Jesus, what is the criteria for eternal life (pages 4, 5)?
5. What does confidence in our own righteousness before God reveal about us (page 5)?

6. What does it mean to keep the law (pages 5, 6)?
7. How does the law remedy faith in our own righteousness (page 6)?
8. Are all Christians called to sell everything they have and give it to the poor? Explain (page 7)?
9. Is money the only obstacle between man and heaven (page 7)?
10. Explain how it is salvation is impossible with men (page 8)?
11. How then is one saved (page 9)?