

Series: *Jesus the Master Evangelist*

Title: " 'Good Teacher' or 'Christ the Lord' ?" (part 1)

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

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Luke 18:18-27 –

18. Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"
19. So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.
20. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother.' "
21. And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth."
22. So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."
23. But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich.
24. And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, He said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!

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25. For 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."

26. And those who heard it said, "Who then can be saved?"

27. But He said, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."

As we continue our study of the Lord Jesus as the Master Evangelist, we will be considering two familiar passages in the book of Luke. These passages record the encounters of two men with the Lord Jesus Christ. Both of them are rich men. Both of them are men of power and prominence in Israel.

The first man is the rich young ruler. The second man is the publican Zacchaeus. Two men – similar in ways, yet different. Both of them approach the Lord Jesus Christ. But the two men approach Him in two entirely different ways. Each man approaches Jesus on a different basis. For the rich young ruler, there is one result. For Zacchaeus, there is an entirely different result.

These two men picture for us the only two classes of people that exist in the eyes of God – those who are saved, and those who are lost. And how the Lord Jesus deals with each of these men teaches us vital lessons about how we must approach Christ, and how we must approach others about Christ.

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First, we consider the account of the rich young ruler that we read a few moments ago, in Luke chapter 18, verses 18 to 27. This incident in the ministry of our Lord is also recorded in parallel accounts in Matthew chapter 19 and in Mark chapter 10.

We read in these accounts that a young man comes to Jesus. None of the Gospel writers give us his name. They only tell us that he was a young man, that he was a ruler of the Jews, and that he was a rich man. Often, the inspired Scriptures are economical with words. The Holy Spirit only tells us what is important to the point, and that is the case here. But in a few verses, God's Word tells us a great deal. So let us examine carefully what takes place.

I'd like for us to take note of four things. First, notice how this young man addresses Jesus. Second, notice his basis for approaching Jesus. Third, notice how Jesus deals with this young man. And fourth, notice the young man's final response to Jesus.

We notice first of all how the young man addresses Jesus in verse 18. He calls Him, "Good Master" – literally, "Good Teacher" or "Good Rabbi." The word translated "good" in this passage is a word that speaks not just of outward goodness. This word has to do with inward goodness, with intrinsic goodness,

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intrinsic holiness – holiness that is an essential part of the nature of a thing or a person. The young man is ascribing such intrinsic goodness or holiness to Jesus.

But he also addresses Jesus as “Master.” In the Hebrew language in which their conversation took place, the term would have been, “Rabbi.” This was the term by which the Jews addressed their human teachers of the law. It wasn’t necessarily a term of respect. It was simply a form of address that acknowledged that someone was a religiously educated man. Today, we would probably use the term “doctor” or “professor”. In other words, the form of address that this young man used – “Rabbi” – “Master” – “Teacher” – “doctor” – “professor” – this is an inherently human term. And by definition, it is a term that denotes intrinsic human fallibility.

And this was the term that the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees used to address Jesus. They called Him “rabbi” – but they refused to address Him as “Lord”. In Matthew 12:38 the unbelieving Jews say, “Master” – “rabbi” – we want to see a sign from You.” They used the same term – “rabbi” – at various times when they tried to trick Jesus with words. And when Jesus triumphally entered Jerusalem just a few days before His crucifixion, and His disciples and the crowd shouted their hosannas, the unbelieving Jewish leaders said,

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“Teacher” – “rabbi” – rebuke Your disciples” – make them stop calling you Lord.

The fact is, the two terms that the young ruler uses to address Jesus are self-contradictory. There is no such thing as a “Good Rabbi” in the sense that this young man addressed Jesus. There is no such thing as a fallible human teacher who is also at one and the same time intrinsically holy. As Jesus would tell him, only God is intrinsically holy. So why are you addressing Me that way, when you think I’m just one of the rabbis? The way that the rich young ruler addressed Jesus indicates the fact that he did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

The way the young man addresses Jesus indicates that perhaps he thought like this: “Here is a rabbi who seems to have found the way to eternal life through moral effort. I’m going to ask him what I need to do in order to have eternal life myself.”

Many people approach Jesus this way today. They approach Him as a mere human being. They approach Him as a “good teacher” or a “moral example” – but not as Lord and Savior. And that is how this young man is approaching Jesus.

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So we've seen, first of all, how this young man approaches Jesus. He approaches Him as a human teacher, a moral example perhaps, but not as the divine Messiah.

Secondly, notice the basis on which the young man approaches Jesus. Notice his question in verse 18: "Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" – In the original, his question literally reads like this: "When I have done what one single act will I obtain eternal life by right of inheritance?" We'll see in a moment why this young man thinks that there could be one single thing that he needed yet to do, in order to inherit eternal life.

The word "inherit" here is interesting. This was a particularly meaningful term to a Jew. We see throughout the Gospel accounts that the unbelieving Jews thought like this: "We are Abraham's sons. And because we are Abraham's sons, the land of Palestine, and eternal life, belong to us simply by right of inheritance, if we do the right things."

And that is the essence of this young man's position: He is resting his hope for eternal life in the fact that he is a Jew. He is resting on the fact that he is a descendant of Abraham by birth. So in his view, eternal life is his by right of inheritance. If he did the right things, if he kept the Jewish law, he would have

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eternal life by right of inheritance. That was his thinking. That was the basis of his approach to Jesus. That is what is behind the question.

Today, many people approach Jesus on that kind of basis. I belong to a certain church. I was born in a Christian home. I was baptized as a child. I've kept the Ten Commandments. I've lived by the Sermon on the Mount. And these things count with God. If I have enough of these things on one side of the scales, over against the bad things that I've done on the other side of the scales, well, those good things will outweigh the bad things, and that will be enough for me to gain eternal life. I'll have a right to it by my own merit.

But the Bible tells us that we cannot approach God on that basis. And in a few moments, as we see Jesus' response to this young man, we're going to see why we can't approach God on the basis of church membership, or Christian parents, or baptism, or keeping the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, or anything else.

So first, we have seen how the young man addresses Jesus – as "good master" but not as "Lord." And secondly, we have seen the basis on which the young man approaches Jesus. He approaches Jesus on the basis of good works.

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Next, we take note of Jesus' response. The Master Evangelist begins to deal with this young man. And in this passage, we see two things about Jesus' response. First, Jesus confronts the rich young ruler with His own nature and His own holiness. Jesus makes it clear that the young man has come to someone who is entirely different from the person the young man imagined. And secondly, Jesus confronts the young man with the holiness of God's Law, in order to show the young man his true spiritual condition.

First, Jesus confronts the young man with His Person. He confronts the young man with the fact that He is the Son of God. "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God." Here Jesus calls to mind the two essential parts of the Jewish confession concerning the intrinsic goodness of Jehovah. The first is from Deuteronomy 6:4 – "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." The second is a repeated statement in many of the Psalms – "The Lord is good."

Jesus says to this young man, "Why do you ascribe to Me what may only properly be ascribed to God, when you obviously don't believe that I am the Son of God, but only another one of the rabbis?"



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Some false teachers have claimed that when Jesus answered the way He did, He was denying His own deity. But He wasn't doing that at all. Quite the contrary. Jesus was reminding the young man that all mankind are sinners, and that God is the only one who is "good" – the only one who possesses inherent goodness, holiness, perfection. Jesus was confronting the young man with His own personal Holiness as the Son of God.

And secondly, Jesus confronts this young man with the holiness of God's Law. Just as God is intrinsically good, God's Law is intrinsically good, as we read in Romans chapter 7 and verse 12, that the commandment of God is "holy, just, and good."

Jesus says to him in verse 20, "You know the commandments." And in the parallel account in Matthew chapter 19, Matthew elaborates and tells us that Jesus further said, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." Of course, this is the Law, not the Gospel. Before pointing him to the way to life, Jesus wants this young man to clearly understand that the Law is a higher standard than this young man, or anyone else, can possibly keep. Because we are sinners by nature, we cannot keep God's Law perfectly. Jesus wants to impress upon this young man the fact that it is absolutely futile, absolutely impossible, for him to gain eternal life by his own merit.

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We see the same thing when Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount in the book of Matthew. The rich young ruler is like the people today who say, "My religion is the Sermon on the Mount." When many people think of the Sermon on the Mount, they think of the Beatitudes at the beginning of Matthew chapter 5 – "Blessed are the poor in spirit" – "Blessed are those who mourn" – "Blessed are the meek" – and so on. But many people do not realize that the Sermon on the Mount that begins with the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 1, extends all the way to the end of Matthew chapter 7, and it covers many other things.

Many people say, "My religion is the Sermon on the Mount." And what they usually mean is this: "My religion is a religion of doing the best I can," or "My religion is living according to the principles of meekness, and mercy, and peacemaking, and so on, that Jesus set forth." But often, when you ask a person who says, "My religion is the Sermon on the Mount" the question, "Well, what does the Sermon on the Mount say?" – they can't tell you. They don't really know it. They have no idea what kind of a standard they are holding up for themselves.

But what does the Sermon on the Mount actually say? Well, here are a few quotations of Jesus actual words:

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Matthew 5 verse 21: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not murder*, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is [merely] angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." – Just as guilty as if he had committed murder.

Matthew 5 verse 27: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not commit adultery*.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Matthew 5 verse 33: "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not swear falsely*, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all. . . But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

What is Jesus' point? His point is in Matthew 5 beginning at verse 17, which is also part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, [the tiniest part of the law will not pass until] all is fulfilled."

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Jesus was telling the people, "Law-keeping is not a mere matter of externals. Law-keeping is a matter of the condition of your heart. And the condition of the human heart is such that you cannot possibly do enough good in order to save yourself. If you fail in the least little fragment of the law, you have broken the whole law. You cannot keep the Law."

And as we go beyond the Sermon on the Mount to the context of the whole Gospel of Matthew, and then outward into the entire context of the Word of God, we see this same theme repeated again, and again, and again: Doing your best is not good enough. Not nearly. All the righteousness you could ever claim to have is as filthy rags in the sight of God, we read in Isaiah. And we read in the book of James that if you have kept the whole law, and yet broken God's Law in just one point, you are just as guilty before God as if you had broken the whole law.

The Word of God tells us that we are in a hopeless condition. You need someone to stand in your place who has kept the Law perfectly. And that only One is the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a hopeless sinner, and only Christ can redeem you from your sins.

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So the Lord Jesus holds this same high standard, and the impossibility of keeping that standard, before this young man. He says to him, "You know the commandments." And as a ruler of the Jews, this young man certainly knew the commandments.

But as we continue our study next time, we're going to take note of something very interesting – and that is the list of commandments that Jesus gives to the rich young ruler in verse 20.