

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Rich Young Ruler**

SCRIPTURE: Matt 19:16-30

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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Turn with me, please, to Matthew 19:16-22. While you're turning there, you perhaps will notice that I have skipped several paragraphs in chapters 18 and 19. That is because we dealt with those topics in other series the past few years. In 18:15-20 the issue of resolving conflict in the church is discussed, which was the topic of our series entitled Great Church Fights last fall.ⁱ The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant was preached in our series on parables a few summers ago.ⁱⁱ And the topic of divorce, chapter 19:1-12, was preached in a marriage series.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now I ask you to stand as we read Matthew 19:16-22:

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

"Which ones?" the man inquired.

Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Sharing one's faith is not easy for most people. One of the hardest aspects of personal evangelism is figuring out how to break the ice and turn a conversation toward spiritual topics. People love to talk about the weather and sports and even politics, but as soon as you mention God or eternal life, many people just shut down.

But once in a great while you meet what I like to call a "pre-Christian." Either because of seeds planted by others or due to certain events in his life, he is like a piece of ripe fruit that's just ready to drop. The person may ask, "What is it that gives you such peace in your life?" Or they may simply blurt out, "How can I be sure I'm going to heaven?" Then all you need to do is share the Four Spiritual Laws or the Roman Road to Salvation, or the hand illustration taught at the seminar this past weekend, and the person is ready to pray the sinner's prayer.

In His ministry Jesus met both kinds of people. Many had to be skillfully steered toward their spiritual need. For example, when talking with the woman at the well in John 4 Jesus used the everyday circumstances in her life to get her to think, perhaps for the very first time, about ultimate truth and her eternal destiny. Nicodemus is another example in John 3, as Jesus had his famous "born again" discussion with that religious leader. Both the woman and Nicodemus were

essentially clueless until Jesus pried open their spiritual eyes with questions and illustrations designed just for them.

But in our Scripture reading today we come across one of those rare individuals who just comes up to Jesus and pops the question: “What must I do to get eternal life?” Talk about an opening! You know, this happened once to the Apostle Paul. The Philippian jailer fell down trembling and asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul’s answer hit the bull’s eye—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” How can you beat that for brevity and theological accuracy?

But Jesus’ response to the Rich Young Ruler is troubling in the extreme. Frankly, it violates all the rules I learned in Bible College, Seminary, Evangelism Explosion, Campus Crusade, and the Billy Graham School of Evangelism put together. Jesus would have flunked Evangelism 101. It’s actually kind of embarrassing.

Now please understand that I have my tongue planted squarely in my cheek as I say that. But allow me to play the devil’s advocate for the sake of learning some important spiritual truth.

A straightforward question from a hot prospect: “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

When you put the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke side-by-side, you discover that the man in our Scripture text today is rich, young, and a ruler. All three Gospel writers tell us he was rich; in fact, they all say he was very rich. Matthew adds that he is young, and Luke calls him a ruler, a broad term for a person of significant authority and influence. This man reminds me of one of the young bucks who has made a fortune in computer software by age 30 and, with billions in his portfolio, begins to ask, “Is this all there is?”

But he doesn’t ask the question merely out of intellectual curiosity or philosophical amusement. He is in dead earnest. Mark tells us he runs to Jesus and falls on his knees in desperation. The question on his lips is one that every evangelist loves to hear: “How do I get saved?” He is a hot prospect for conversion. He’s ready to sign the card, raise his hand, and walk the aisle.

A puzzling answer from Jesus: He says, “Obey the commandments.”

And just in case you think Jesus is talking about what the man must do *after* he is saved, look carefully at His words: “If you want to *enter* life, obey the commandments.” Now any first-year Bible College student knows that’s the wrong answer. Jesus should have told him, “There is nothing you can do to earn eternal life; all your righteous deeds are as filthy rags. Abandon your own efforts and cast yourself on Me, because salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.” Now that would have been a good answer. But Jesus appeals to the law rather than to grace and faith. Why?

First, notice what leads up to this answer. Matthew tells the story a little differently than Mark or Luke, but in all three Gospels the rich young ruler uses the word “good.” In Mark and Luke he

says to Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do?” whereas in Matthew he says, “Teacher, what good thing must I do?” This isn’t necessarily a contradiction, for perhaps what the man actually said was, “Good teacher, what good thing must I do?” They report what they remember.

But in all three Gospels Jesus picks up on the word “good” and challenges the man to think about the implications of his use of the term. In Matthew’s account Jesus says, “Why do you ask me about what is good?” and in Mark and Luke He says, “Why do you call me good?” But in all three He adds, “There is only One who is good,” speaking, of course, of God. Jesus is trying to move the man’s focus from good things to a good God because things have clearly become His idol.^{iv}

But the man needs to not only recognize the unique goodness of God; he also needs to recognize his own unique sinfulness, and I think that’s why Jesus says to him, “Obey the commandments.” When the man asks for clarification, “Which ones?”, Jesus quotes five of the Ten Commandments and then adds a bonus one—“love your neighbor as yourself.” Perhaps your response is the same as mine, “Good grief, why does Jesus tell him that?” I learned when I was still a child that the law can’t save anyone; it can only condemn. It was drilled into my head that the Ten Commandments were God’s instructions about how to live a long happy life, not how to gain eternal life.

In fact, I was told that a person could break all the Commandments and so long as he truly repented he could still enjoy eternal life. (Now I wasn’t encouraged to break them, mind you; but never was I told that keeping them had anything to do with inheriting eternal life). Yet here Jesus seems to be saying to this man, “You want to know what good thing you can do in order to inherit eternal life? I’ll tell you what to do—obey the Law.”

Does Jesus really believe that the Law is this man’s ticket to eternal life? No, and I’ll tell you why. He has just said that “There is only One who is good.” The clear implication is that none of us can keep the Law fully. He’s trying to get this man to acknowledge his spiritual bankruptcy and cast himself on the mercy of God. But instead the man makes a highly questionable claim and then asks another straightforward question.

A questionable claim and another straightforward question: “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?”

First he says to Jesus, “All these I have kept.” In Luke’s account the rich young ruler claims not only to have kept the Law, but to have done so since he was a boy. I guess he’s saying he never told a lie, always honored his father and mother, never got drunk, was faithful to his wife, never ripped off a customer, and never coveted what his neighbor had.

But in making that claim he has just told a lie, or perhaps he is simply deluded. What he clearly fails to understand is that the Law goes much deeper than the outward rules he claims to have kept. Did you notice that the five Commandments Jesus reiterates are from the second half of the Decalogue that deals with horizontal relationships, and are undoubtedly the easier half of the

Law to keep. But even these Commandments go much further than he realizes. You will recall that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made it clear that lust is a kind of adultery, hatred is a kind of murder, and exaggeration is a kind of lying. Does this young man realize how demanding and all-pervasive the moral law of God is? Undoubtedly not.

Furthermore, the Law is a unit. Even if he had somehow kept the laws governing horizontal relationships, which are definitely the easier ones to keep, what about the vertical ones? The very first Commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” This is not merely a prohibition against bowing down to idols; it’s about God being first in our lives. He must take precedence over every other loyalty.

Jesus is trying to get this man to realize that while he lays claim to good religious behavior, there is something in his life that is clearly more important to him than God. Unless he is willing to let go of this, he cannot at the same time put His trust in God, and until he does he can never inherit eternal life.

This use Jesus makes of the Law in talking to the Rich Young Ruler is fascinating to me, because the evangelism training we are offering in our Lay Bible Institute starting on September 28 is based on the fact that the Law is explicitly helpful in evangelism. In his book *The Way of the Master*, Ray Comfort encourages us to ask the person we are trying to share our faith with if they think they are good enough to get to heaven. Many will respond positively, so in a kind manner you can explore that with them as follows:

“Have you ever told a lie?” Almost everyone will acknowledge they have.

Then you ask, “What do you call someone who lies?” A liar.

“Have you ever stolen anything?” Yes.

“What do you call someone who steals?” A thief.

“Have you ever hated anyone?” Yes.

“Did you know Jesus calls hatred murder?”

“Have you ever felt lust for another person?” Yes.

“Did you know that Jesus said the one who lusts has committed adultery in his heart?”

Then you say, “So you’ve just told me you’re a lying, thieving murderer and adulterer, and yet you think you’re good enough to get to heaven?”

When spoken with a smile rather than a spirit of condemnation, this approach can actually get a person’s attention and bring conviction to their heart in a way that almost never happens by simply telling people that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their life! And frankly, this use of the Law fits perfectly with what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:24: “The Law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

Now in verse 20 the Rich Young Ruler follows his bogus claim of having kept the Law with a second straightforward question that gives Jesus still another perfect opportunity to nail him with the Gospel: “What do I still lack?” he asks. Maybe now Jesus will tell the young man what Paul told the Philippian jailer: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” But He

doesn't.

An even more puzzling answer: “Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor.”

Amazingly Jesus gives the ruler something to achieve rather than something to believe. What in the world is going on here? Is this the formula for salvation? Give everything to the poor and God will give you eternal life? Well, in a sense, for this particular man, yes. This man needs this specific challenge because his whole identity is wrapped up in his wealth. But Jesus is not establishing a universal principle requiring all believers to give away all their possessions. If that were true then the kingdom would exclude people like Abraham, David, Solomon, Joseph of Arimethea, or Zaccheus, the wealthy tax collector. Nor is Jesus establishing a two tiered Christianity—normal believers over here and super-spiritual believers who take a vow of poverty over there.

But Jesus has identified wealth as an issue in this man's life that is an insurmountable roadblock to true discipleship. Had Jesus simply come to him and said, “Believe, and you will be saved,” he would have jumped all over that, but the basic idolatry issue in his life would have remained unresolved. Had Jesus told him to tithe his wealth or even give half of it away, I strongly suspect he would have agreed to do it. But for this man, to whom money is a god, giving it all away is beyond question. He cannot and he will not.

Worldly wealth, friends, can have a dulling effect on our spiritual lives. The more we accumulate coins on which is stamped “In God we trust,” the more difficult it is for us to trust in God. Wealth can take care of our daily bread, so we don't have to pray for it, wealth can purchase medical healing, wealth can provide for our future, wealth can eliminate our enemies, wealth can buy us justice or revenge. What do we need God for?

Back in chapter 16 Jesus told the parable of the Shrewd Manager. Here's how He summarizes the point of the parable in verse 13: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

But friends, wealth itself is not the real issue here; it's the love and trust of wealth. If you look in the very next chapter you find a man named Zaccheus who also had a money problem. He gave away a lot of it, but not all of it, yet Jesus said about him, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Abraham, David, Solomon could have probably bought and sold this rich young ruler several times, yet God never told them to sell everything and give to the poor. The reason Jesus demands it of this man is that He knows his heart and He knows the man is a money-lover and a money-server.

And of course, do not overlook the fact that Jesus does not simply tell the rich young ruler to sell everything and give to the poor. He also adds, “Then come, follow me.” Following Jesus is really the bottom line, but that can never happen unless the god of wealth is dethroned.^v

When we listen to Jesus talk about eternal life, we find that He focuses on these two words more

than anything else—follow me. Certainly that entails a recognition that He is the Savior of the world, having died for our sins and been raised from the dead. But it entails more than that. It involves entrusting ourselves fully to Him as Lord.

With the choice placed before him of either surrendering to Jesus or clinging to his stuff, we read in verse 22, “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.” What a tragic response!

A tragic response: “He went away sad.”

He had great wealth, but in reality his wealth had him. It gripped his heart. It was a ball and chain around his very life. And thus as he walked away he was dejected. His gold chariot didn’t help. His lake house in Galilee brought him no joy. His servants couldn’t pull him out of the doldrums.

Please understand, friends, that the struggle to find security in money is not only a problem for the wealthy. Some money-lovers happen to be very poor. On the other hand, some very rich people are poor in spirit and walk humbly before God. And while we’re talking about the danger of putting worldly priorities in the place of God, let’s not limit ourselves to money and possessions. There are other things that can be just as effective in keeping us out of the kingdom. What about those seeking status and success? What about the intellectually brilliant? What about those rich in moral or artistic achievement? The question is this: Is there anything in our life that if God said, “I want you to give that up completely and follow me,” we would be tempted to walk away with head bowed in sadness? Whatever that might be, God calls us to renounce all trust and dependence upon it and place our hope in Him alone.

The rich young ruler goes away sad, but Jesus sees it as a teachable moment for His disciples.

An astonishing application: “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.”

Let’s pick up our Scripture reading with verse 23:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell 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."

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers

or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

What does Jesus mean when He says, “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”? I’ve heard people try to explain this away as referring to a certain gate in the wall of Jerusalem where a camel had to kneel in order to get in, the meaning being that the rich man has to humble himself to get into heaven. But there’s no historic evidence of such a gate. All you have to do to understand Jesus is to look at how the disciples interpret what he says. They ask, “Then who then can be saved?” They know Jesus is speaking of a real camel going through the eye of a real needle, and they know it can’t be done. And if it’s impossible for a rich man to get to heaven, then they conclude that everyone’s must be up a creek without a paddle! After all, their culture saw riches as proof of God’s blessing. If even those showered with God’s favor can’t enter the kingdom, then who can?

Well, Jesus doesn’t agree with their health/wealth theology, but He does affirm their understanding that everyone is up a creek without a paddle: “With man this is impossible.” No one can be saved if it depends on human ingenuity or hard work or brilliance or anything else dependent upon mankind. But with God all things are possible, including salvation. I think Jesus is finally getting it right; He may pass the evangelism course after all.

Salvation is always a miracle of divine grace. What human beings cannot do, God can do. Recently a member of our church came close to getting electrocuted. As he emerged from a damp crawl space under a house he grabbed a sill on which sat an air conditioner that had not been properly grounded. As the electricity surged through his body he found he could not let go. With every ounce of energy he could muster he pulled his hand away and collapsed on the ground. After a couple of days in the hospital he recovered fully. But his experience reminds me of how difficult it is for us to pull ourselves away from things. No matter what it is that we are holding onto for security, we cannot let go of it without God’s help. Only He can change our hearts and turn them from ourselves and our stuff to him. But Jesus makes a second point:

Those who follow Him will never be sorry. The Apostle Peter speaks in verse 27: “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

It’s hard to judge what Peter’s attitude is as he says this, but in His answer Jesus promises that whatever we lose in following Him, God will make it up to us. The focus here in Matthew is that He will make it up at the Second Coming. He says in verse 28, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne . . .” then you can expect to be repaid for your sacrifice—100 times as much!

But Mark tells it differently. In Mark 10:29-30 we read,

"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life."

Jesus is not simply promising future heavenly blessings in place of present earthly sacrifices.

Now I don't know if this is a guaranteed promise or a general one. If a believer loses his family of origin for the sake of Christ, the family he receives that is 100 times as large may be a spiritual family, i.e. a church full of brothers and sisters in Christ. I have known missionaries with very few earthly investments who have been provided for with beautiful retirement homes through the benevolence of those who honored their service. God has many different ways of fulfilling His promises, but one thing you can count on is that if you follow Him, you will never be sorry.

But did you notice that Mark adds—"and with these things, you will also receive persecutions"? Why did he have to add that? Because the Scriptures are always honest. Following Jesus is not always going to be a bed of roses, but the final chapter is going to be sweet indeed.

Conclusion. Now, friends, I have couched this message around the theme of personal evangelism. We've asked, in effect, why Jesus breaks all the rules of personal evangelism in dealing with this man. It's because Jesus never treats potential converts as notches on his Bible but as unique individuals, all of whom have different needs and all of whom must be approached differently.

But I really don't think that's the primary point of this passage. I think Jesus wants to confront each of us with the question: "Is there anything in your life so important to you that it is preventing you from following Him?" Anything? When is a better time to let go of it than right now?

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- i. The complete *Great Church Fights* series is available by following this link: <http://www.firstfreewichita.org/Sermons/sermonschurchfights.aspx>. The sermon that would probably be the most helpful on resolving conflict in the church is *Are We Willing to Become a Peacemaking Church?*, (<http://www.fefcwichita.org/pdfsermon/2007/071111ma.pdf>) preached on November 11, 2007.
- ii. This parable was preached here at First Free by Matthew T. Gertz on August 7, 2005, *So You Think You Want Justice?: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*, (<http://www.fefcwichita.org/pdfsermon/2005/080705mg.pdf>).
- iii. I preached *Why God Hates Divorce* on November 7, 2004. (http://www.fefcwichita.org/pdfsermon/Why_God_Hates_Divorce110704MAndrus.pdf) Another sermon on divorce is **A Sermon for the Ages: Hard Sayings on Adultery, Divorce, and Remarriage**, preached on February 23, 2007. (<http://fefcwichita.org/pdfsermon/2007/070225ma.pdf>) There is also a paper on *Biblical Ethics of Divorce and Remarriage*. http://www.fefcwichita.org/pdfsermon/2007/Divorce_and_Remarriage.pdf

iv. In the Mark and Luke versions Jesus is perhaps also trying to get the rich young ruler to acknowledge His deity. Jesus doesn't deny that He is good; He simply affirms that only God is good. Of course, if Jesus is God, then it is perfectly OK to refer to Him as "Good teacher."

v. Is it possible we need to pay a little more attention to Jesus and a little less attention to Paul on this crucial issue of how to inherit eternal life? Now that may sound like heresy, but hear me out. The words of Jesus and the words of Paul are equally inspired and accurate, and there is no real contradiction between them. But it is obvious that much of what Paul wrote on the doctrine of salvation was written against the backdrop of strident legalism. It was his task to stop the pendulum that in the early church was swinging toward an emphasis on religious performance, and bring it back to the Cross and grace and faith. The danger (and many have fallen into it) of listening to Paul alone is that we may come to think that if we simply say, "I believe that Jesus was the Son of God who died on the cross to forgive my sins," then we're saved. To such thinking our Lord's brother, James, also inspired by God, writes, "You say you believe in God. So what? Even Satan's demons believe that—and shudder." But they're doomed to hell.