

Luke 18:18-30
The Rich Young Ruler

In a recent article on npr.org the author wondered if some questions are better than others. It turns out some are. For example, if you are playing twenty questions with your child, and they are trying to guess what kind of animal you are, they might ask “are you a bear?” or “are you a lion?” These are not bad questions, but they are very limited. That is, they don’t give much information beside ‘yes or ‘no.’ A better question might be “are you a mammal?” or “do you live in Africa?” These questions are better because they yield more helpful information.

We ask questions all the time. We ask them of others and we ask them of ourselves. Every decision we make begins with the question “should I . . . ?” But as we all know, some decisions are more significant than others. Therefore, some of our questions have a much greater impact because they ask about things that have a more significant effect. The questions “do you want to go out to eat after church?” and “do you want to buy a house?” are both financial decisions, but the latter has a far greater, and a far larger effect on our future. “Do you want to go to a movie?” and “do you want to marry me?” are questions that are very different because of the long-term effects of the answer.

No question is as important as the one asked in this passage. And the answer given is equally important, because this is the one question we must get correct. We may not enjoy the lunch or the movie. We may make a bad investment on the house or use poor judgment in determining whom we will marry, but none of those questions is as eternally meaningful as “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 18).

To begin, let us recall that Jesus never pretended that the answer to that question was easy.

“Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:24).

“²³And He was saying to them all, ‘if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it’” (Luke 9:23-24).

“²⁶If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

But, in truth, in responding to the answer Jesus gives, the choice is a simple one. We can choose to rely upon our own good works, or the atoning work of Jesus Christ. We can trust to ourselves, relying upon our wits and means, or we can humbly submit to the fact that we can bring nothing to the bargaining table as we sit across from a perfectly holy and righteous God.

The Question

Luke writes that a “ruler questioned Him, saying, ‘good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’” (v. 18). The individual who asked this question was an EE trainee’s dream. He was ready. He was eager. He understood his need. He had come to the right person to find the truth. Everything was there for an eternally happy ending.

This man had so many advantages. He was so close. He was a 'ruler' probably of the local synagogue. That meant he had received religious training and had experience in studying God's Word. He had kept the details of the Law. He had remained morally pure. He had been conditioned to wait eagerly for the Messiah. He realized that there was an eternal state and that he had not yet attained it. Despite all his efforts, he felt empty and unfulfilled. He knew there must be more. Instead of being self-assured, he was restless.

He was also, apparently, ready and willing to do something to attain that state. Like another Pharisee, he had sought out Jesus hoping to end his search and find the answer to his burning question. "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ²this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him'" (John 3:1-2).

This man was asking the right question. His question was about "eternal life." The Jews understood that eternal life was not so much a time span, but rather a quality of existence. It was a given of Jewish theology. As the prophet Daniel had written, "many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Eternal life meant to have a meaningful understanding of God, "this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). It was to possess "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). It was to "rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

He was also asking with the right attitude. It appeared as if he was genuinely looking for an answer. He was not on some secret mission, sent by the Pharisees to catch Jesus in a misspoken word. He was not trying to debate or argue his way into heaven. He really wanted to know. So much so that he ignored all sense of dignity and propriety and, as Mark recorded in his account, he "ran up to Him and knelt before Him" (Mark 10:17). He ran. He knelt (before a man, no less)! He was unconcerned what others in the crowd might think. It did not matter that his reputation among the other local religious leaders would be ruined. He had a question to ask. He was not trying to engineer a theological debate; he wanted to know how to get to heaven.

And finally, he was asking the right person. In matters of religion, many look for answers to the most important questions in the most unreliable places. To take advice on spiritual matters from a friend, no matter how close or how caring, is risky business. To heed the advice of a perfect stranger is even more so. Yet how often do we hear of people making significant spiritual decisions based on something as meaningless as the popularity of the speaker. This man had come to Jesus. He had, no doubt, heard of Him and probably followed His career for some time. Now he wanted to "know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:20).

He addressed Jesus with respect, calling Him "good Teacher" (v. 18). The word used for 'good' means good by nature. This may not have been a recognition of divinity, but it was clearly a sign of an

awareness that Jesus offered a genuine witness to divine truth. In other words, he clearly believed Jesus could answer his question.

An Answer and a Rebuttal

And Jesus did not disappoint. In response, “Jesus said to him, ‘why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone’” (v. 19). It ought to be clear that Jesus was not denying His divinity. He was not stating that He was not God. Such a statement would be inconsistent with the body of Scripture, as well as specific statements made by Jesus, Himself.

“Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24).

“ Jesus said to them, ‘truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am’” (John 8:58).

“ I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

Jesus claimed to be God, His enemies understood that He claimed to be God, and they crucified Him for that very thing.

Instead, Jesus was pointing out that if this rabbi called Him good, and God alone was good, then he must also affirm that He was from God. And if that was the case, the rabbi must be willing to obey His command. In other words, Jesus was making it clear that if this man was serious about his question, he would have to accept whatever answer Jesus gave. In His divinity, Jesus knew this man’s heart. He knew that this man’s desire was superficial.

Jesus began to address his question by listing some of the major points of 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’” (v. 20). Some commentators discuss why Jesus rearranged the order of these commandments, or only listed some of them, but I do not think Jesus was trying to offer a definitive list of the commandments, nor was He trying to specifically state only those parts of the Law which must be kept to enter into eternal life. Rather, He was calling the man’s attention to those parts of the decalogue that dealt with humanity because He knew that was the man’s weakness.

We know that there is, perhaps, no better measure of our love for God than our love for humanity. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). The most tangible way we demonstrate our love for God is by loving people.

But the young man was not intimidated. Smiling confidently, “he said, ‘all these things I have kept from my youth’” (v. 21). He had kept the Law since his youth, that is since his *bah mitzvah*, when he became literally “a son of the law.” But one might immediately wonder why, if he knew he had kept the Law in its entirety since he was a young man, why was he so concerned about eternal life? Why did he not embrace what we would call “eternal security?”

I think the answer is that he knew better. He might try to convince Jesus, but he could not convince himself. Perhaps he had kept the Law as he bragged, but probably he excelled at keeping only the letter,

and not the spirit, of the law. His self-deception was only skin deep. He knew the truth, “for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). But to gain that knowledge, the Law must be viewed in the proper light. It must be recognized that the Law must be kept inwardly if one is to be sinless.

“Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being” (Psalm 51:6).

“²¹You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘you shall not commit murder’ and ‘whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘you good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘you fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell” (Matthew 5:21-22).

It is amazing to consider what length some people will go to in their self-deceit. This man’s natural tendency, as well as the teachings of the Pharisees, impelled him to want to merit his salvation. In turn, Jesus wanted the young man to recognize that he could not earn salvation by keeping the Law, even to the extent he thought he had. The man needed to confess his sins and to recognize his inadequacy. He needed to acknowledge that “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). He needed to get to the point where like Paul, he could say,

“⁷What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘you shall not covet.’ ⁸But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. ⁹I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; ¹⁰and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; ¹¹for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me” (Romans 7:7-11).

The Clarification and the Response

Jesus was not persuaded by the young ruler's claims, “when Jesus heard this, He said to him, ‘one thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me’” (v. 22). The man had tried to convince himself that he had done all he could. Jesus demanded one thing more; that the young man deny himself. He had to choose obedience to Jesus over his own comfort and the expectations of his family. The young ruler needed to come to the place where he could “count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

There are two points to make at this juncture. First, this was not salvation by works. Jesus was merely saying “trust me alone.” The young man would not be saved *because* he gave away his wealth. That noble act of altruism could never be enough to compensate for his sins, regardless of how wealthy he may have been. He could not buy his way into God’s grace. The general principle was that true, saving faith requires obedience. The young man could hold nothing back. He could not compartmentalize his faith.

Second, this was not a prescriptive requirement for someone to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus was addressing the particular needs of this man. It was much like God’s call to Abraham. The command to “take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him

there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Genesis 22:2) was no more for all people through all time than this command of Jesus to “sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor” (v. 22).

Unfortunately, “when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich” (v. 23). Matthew elaborates stating that “he went away grieving” (Matthew 19:22). He had been so close, but he simply could not follow this one command. He could not obey Jesus in this one area, and it cost him salvation.

We can appreciate the truth that even one sin can ruin us eternally. His possessions kept him from Christ. Think of Herod who “was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him” (Mark 6:20). But Herod would not give up Herodias. One small leak, if left unattended, will sink a great ship.

The Teaching

“Jesus looked at him and said, ‘how hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!’” (v. 24). The rich young man had made his decision. As he left, Jesus turned to His disciples and took advantage of the moment to make certain the meaning of what they had just witnessed was not lost on them. His comments must have seemed confusing. Remember that wealth was a sign to Jews of God’s blessing. The rich were thought to be held in God’s special favor. For Jesus to claim that it would be difficult for them to enter the kingdom of God was counterintuitive.

Jesus continued, “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” (v. 25). Some have argued that the word for camel ought to be the word for cable. In Greek, *kamelos* (camel) and *kamilos* (cable) are very similar. Others suggest that Jesus is referring to a gate called the “needle gate.” These arguments are unsustainable in Scripture and inconsistent with the teaching. Jesus was simply taking an ancient Persian proverb found in the Bhagavad-gita about an elephant going through the eye of a needle. Jesus simply modified this to fit the culture of Palestine, where the camel was the largest animal. Jesus was not making the point that it was difficult, but that it was impossible. Jesus spoke in absolutes.

Experience teaches us that it is difficult for the rich because they can be accustomed to meeting their own needs. It is uncommon for them to be dependent. Being well-born and wealthy brings its own challenges, perhaps especially when it comes to matters of faith, “for consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” (1 Corinthians 1:26).

The disciples were undone. They were overwhelmed with the demands Jesus seemed to place on the. How could they ever merit eternal life? One of them (Matthew declares that it was Peter), blurted out the obvious question, “then who can be saved?” (v. 26). Jesus answer simply, “the things that are impossible with people are possible with God” (v. 27). Jesus had even begun to reveal how this would happen, “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day” (Luke 9:22).

Scripture clearly teaches that every point of salvation is the work of God. That is a good thing, because only God can do what man cannot. Only Jesus Christ “is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him” (Hebrews 7:25). We must remember the power of God’s grace. He does what we cannot. Even riches need not be an obstacle. Abraham, David and Job were all wealthy Old Testament saints. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy as well. Neither is any sin of ours too great for God’s grace to overcome.

Peter remained genuinely concerned, both about this life and the next. He said, “behold, we have left our own homes and followed You” (v. 28). Peter left all. But really, what had he left? What did he leave but some tattered nets and a swamped boat. How we love to magnify what we bring to Christ. Yet, Jesus did not answer with a rebuke. Rather, “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 who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life’” (v. 29-30).

Jesus was speaking of the hidden treasure and a fine pearl,

“⁴⁴The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, ⁴⁶and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:44-46).

How literally should we take this promise of Jesus. I think quite literally. But we must remember *non in specie, sed in valore* (not in appearance but in value). In Christ there is a full equivalency for all we give up. We may lose worldly things, but we receive spiritual blessings. Even in this life. Consider, the countless blessings we receive as a child of God.

The point of the narrative is clear. The only way to inherit eternal life is to humbly trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every area of our lives. A thorough understanding of the fact of Who Jesus is and what He did is sufficient. Believing that He could provide eternal life if we chose to follow Him is inadequate as well. We must actually, truly place our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To know that He is God and could save us if He wanted will never do. Our response must be one of faith.

Takeaways

May we examine ourselves to make certain we hold nothing back in submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.