

# Matthew 19:16-30 – How Good is Good Enough?

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## The Offense of the Gospel

One of the most offensive things about Christians is that they seem certain of having eternal life. They are sure they'll be saved. 'How can you be so sure?', people ask. 'Isn't that a bit arrogant? Do you think you're better than other people?' Do you think Christianity is better than other religions? Surely anyone who does enough good will be accepted by God." But how much is good enough?

In today's passage, we have a man coming to Jesus and asking him what it takes to have eternal life. And what Jesus says is shocking. 'It is impossible,' Jesus says, 'to do enough good to have eternal life.' And as we'll see, it's because it's impossible, that gives followers of Jesus certainty that they *will* inherit eternal life. Sound confusing? Well let's pray as we ask God to open our eyes to his truth.

### 1. Religion is all about what I do

In this story a man comes up to Jesus and says, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?' And Jesus immediately challenges his assumptions. He says, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good.' See this is a devout man. A man who wants to be good. A man who wants to earn his way into God's good books.

And he sees Jesus as a teacher. As someone who can teach him how he to be good. But Jesus challenges this assumption. 'There is only One who is good', he says, referring to God alone. So everyone else, must not be good. But Jesus wants him to realise this himself, so he points to God's standard of goodness in the 10 commandments. He says, 'If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.'

But the man wants to be sure he's doing the right thing, so he asks him, 'Which ones?'. And we are similar aren't we? We think we're pretty good people. We don't murder anyone, or set out to break the law. And there's lots of commands in the Old Testament. Which ones are the most important to keep?

At this point, Jesus does something unexpected. He quotes some specific commands, but not exactly the 10 commandments.

*Matthew 19:18b* Jesus replied, " 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, <sup>19</sup> honor your father and mother, ' <sup>h</sup> and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'

These are the fifth to ninth commandments, and also the one to love your neighbour as yourself, which is not part of the 10 commandments. It's a summary of how God wants us to treat others, found in Leviticus. Now why does he do this? Why does he leave some out and put in the extra one?

Well, I think it's because this man thought being good was all about how you treat other people. And in fact, most of the religions of the world teach that being good is about loving others. And if you do this, you will get to God. Jesus knew this, so he quotes all the laws about loving people.

But he leaves out the first four commandments, which are all about loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. And unless we can do that, we will never have assurance of entering his kingdom.

And the man's response conveys this: "All these I have kept." the young man said. "What do I still lack?". He's still not sure. He knows there is something missing. Now we don't know if he's being totally honest here. But he believed he had kept the commandments all his life. But he still does not have certainty that he's done enough. What Jesus has helped this man realise, is how all human religion is worthless to give you certainty in the afterlife.

I'm reading a book called, 'Brahmin Reborn.' It's about a man who was born into a Hindu priestly family. From a young age, he was taught to recite the scriptures, and perform offerings and rituals every day. His family even went on a long and expensive pilgrimage to worship their god. His great-uncle was the most religious person he knew. But when he was nearing the end of his life, his great-uncle told him he was not sure what would happen to him when he died. In fact, he saw a vision of demons telling him that he would surely suffer in hell. And he went to his death weeping, completely unsure of what will happen to him.

And the writer wrote, 'For all [his] devotion, knowledge, worship... and ceremonial washings, this fervent Hindu Brahmin was nevertheless afraid of dying.' And this is what all human religion leads to. Whenever you ask the question, 'What must I do?', you will never be sure if you've done enough.

## **2. It's impossible for people to do enough good**

Jesus shows how impossible it is by his response. For Jesus says you have to be perfect:

*Matthew 19:21-22* 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." <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Why did he go away sad? Because he was unable to let go of his wealth to follow Jesus. Outwardly he was following the Jewish religion, but his functional god was money. That's why Jesus doesn't quote the first four commands. They're all about worshiping the One true God only. Not bowing down and serving any idols.

Money was this man's idol. And he loved it more than God. Jesus also doesn't quote the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment, which is all about not coveting or being greedy for someone else's possessions. Jesus can see with pinpoint accuracy what's in his heart. And he says, this is what is stopping you. Simply leave your wealth behind, and you will have treasure in heaven, and follow me. But he can't do it.

Jesus says elsewhere, 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'<sup>1</sup> This man treasured his money more than he treasured having life with God forever. He was unable to let it go to have true life. Friends, Jesus can see inside my heart, and inside your heart in the same way. Is money an idol for us?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:21

Do we think that our wealth can protect us, and provide for us. If we have enough of it we will be safe. But one day, all the money and possessions, and treasures of this world will burn up and pass away. And Jesus says, 'If you can't give up your money to follow me, then you will miss out on eternal riches.

And it's not just about money. Jesus calls us to give up everything, even our very lives, to follow him. Long ago in South East Asia, they developed a clever way to catch monkeys. They would get a wide jar with a narrow mouth and bury it in the ground, with the opening sticking out. Then they'd put some treats like fruit or nuts in it. The monkey would put its hand and grab the treat. But when it went to pull its hand out, its closed fist would get stuck. It would scream and pull, but it wanted the treat so badly it wouldn't let go. All it had to do was let the treat go, and it would be free. But it would not.

What on earth is more important to you, than eternity with God? Are you serving and loving and treasuring the things of this world so much that you can't let go? We need to give it up so that we can have eternal life.

But Jesus shows his disciples that it's impossible for us to do this on our own. And he uses the rich man to demonstrate it.

**Matthew 19:23-24** *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."*

This illustration is so graphic it's almost funny. The biggest animal in the ancient near east was a camel. And the smallest hole you could possibly find was a needle. Can you imagine someone trying to push a camel through a needle hole. 'Oh I've got a hair in!' It's ridiculous! And that's the point. It's absolutely impossible.

And he's not just picking on rich people. He's not saying, rich people can't get in, but if you're poor you've got a good chance. Back then, people thought being rich was a sign of being godly. Riches were a blessing from God. So if you were rich, you must be doing something right. So if a rich man who clearly kept the commands couldn't get in, no one could. And the disciples got this point. They were astonished and said, 'Who then can be saved?'

And that's when Jesus gives us the secret:

**Matthew 19:26** *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

We cannot come to God as a rich man, proud of our own achievements. When we come face to face with the awesome, holy, perfect God, we will have nothing to bargain with. Nothing to offer him. We have to come to God on our knees, as a poor beggar, humbly asking him to do the impossible. Asking him to make us weak, poor sinners, able to inherit eternal life. And that leads us to our final point...

### **3. Eternal life is an inheritance gift**

The rich man was used to getting anything he wanted. If he wanted nice clothes, he bought them, if he needed knowledge, he would hire teachers. If it was religion, he knew how to keep the commands. In every

situation, he was the one in the position of power. And he treated eternal life as just one more thing he could achieve. But he completely misunderstood God.

God is not concerned about religion and rules and rituals. He is concerned about a relationship. He's not a harsh master who wants servants to obey him out of fear. He is a Father who wants to adopt and bless his children. Which is why the rich man's question is the wrong question to ask. Children do not *do* anything to *get* an inheritance. They *receive* an inheritance as a loving gift from their father.

And the disciples get this wrong too. Peter says to Jesus, 'We've left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us? He's also treating Jesus like a vending machine. We've put in something. What do we get out of it? But Jesus gently and lovingly corrects him. God doesn't need anything you give him. He owns everything, yet is rich in generosity. He will give them far more than they have given up for him.

Matthew 19:28-30 Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, 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. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Jesus tells that he is the King of glory, and when he sits on his glorious throne, the apostles will share in his glory. This is incredible and undeserved honour. And if anyone has left earthly possessions, God will more than make up for it – a hundred times in this life. Now this is not literally saying if you give \$100, God will give you back \$10,000, as some prosperity preachers teach.

No, if that were the case, how can you literally have 100 mothers? What he is saying is that when you join the community of God's people, you will be given so much more than you've given up. You'll have many more fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers in the family of God. If you've had to leave houses, there will be many more opened up to you. And when you have left this life, you will inherit eternal life. That is the key. Eternal life is not a wage. It's not something you earn with your good works and religious devotion. It's an inheritance that your loving Father gives you.

But how do we get this inheritance? Well there was only one perfect Son of God. Only one who loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. And that's Jesus. And yet he died for all our failures, our pride, our idolatry and shame. And he rose again so that we can follow him. To give us the new life that it was impossible to live on our own.

That's why he says to give up everything to follow him. Because it's only by him living in us, that we can do any good. It's by giving up trying to be good, and trusting in his goodness, that we will have the certainty of eternal life. Will we surrender our lives to him, so that he can lead us and transform us to love like he does?

Will you give up everything to follow him? And trust that he will provide a hundred times what you give up. And in the age to come, make you inherit eternal life as beloved sons and daughters of God?