

Understanding the Rich Young Ruler

(Matthew 19:16-26)

Introduction

Good morning Lighthouse, are you ready for the Word of God? Today, we're going to be in a passage that have tripped up many students of the Word and many preachers have missed what is really going on here. You can search many sermons on this and find a variety of views on this. Unfortunately, 9 out of 10 of the times you will find the conclusions wrong. Now, this is not a boasting on myself that I have it right and so many are wrong. I was blessed and humbled to be under many great teachers and was taught properly how to harmonize Scripture and interpret in context. I was also taught the Gospel for what it is and only by trusting in Jesus alone to save me from my sin was how I am to be saved. Let's go ahead and read our text this morning before moving forward. We're going to read Matthews account of our narrative.

Scripture

Matthew 19:16-26 (16) And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? (17) And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. (18) He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, (19) Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (20) The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? (21) Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. (22) But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (23) Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. (24) And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Now, we read that and if we do not take into account any other Scripture, there's a lot of wrong conclusions that will be drawn. When I was a new a Christian as 16 years old, this passage was one of the first challenges I've ever had. I was not familiar with this passage and did not recall hearing of it. I was excited about my salvation and couldn't help but tell my friends about it. They asked what it took for me to finally stop sinning, give up everything and following Jesus. I was puzzled, I responded that I thought to be saved was to trust Jesus for what He did on the cross and that He took care of my sin problem. That no one is good and that we needed Jesus to do all of the work and I would be saved from the penalty of my sin. They told me that it made salvation "too easy" and excuse preachers use to stay in sin. That was only the first step to the process of salvation. Can you hear the red flags already? They then took me to this passage here and concluded: "See? You must keep all the commandments, give up everything and follow Jesus to have eternal life. Now, what's a 16-year-old, newly saved, new to the Word supposed to do what all this? By God's grace I didn't just jump the gun and conclude them to be right. I challenged them on their own terms. You don't sin anymore and keep the commandments? They tell me they do their best not to. Is that what Jesus said here though? Do your best not to? I asked how they could have given everything up in their life when they all had jobs, friends, family, money, and home they slept in? They responded, "its you have to be willing to give up everything not that literally do it." That's not what Jesus said here either. I knew there was something else going on here. "Coincidentally" the following Sunday, Pastor touched on this passage, everything clicked, and I understood it. Let's read over our passage again and I'll highlight key phrases.

Matthew 19:16-26 (16) And, behold, one came and said unto him, **Good Master, what good thing shall I do,** that I may have eternal life? (17) And he said unto him, **Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God:** but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. (18) He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt

do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, (19) Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (20) The young man saith unto him, **All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?** (21) Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. (22) But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (23) Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. (24) And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. (25) When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, **Who then can be saved? (26) But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.**

A question to consider, is what Jesus told the rich young ruler universal? Is this how someone has eternal life?

I. What is good? vv. 16-17.

A. The rich young rich ruler, v. 16a.

(16) And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

1. Each of the synoptic Gospels identifies this character as rich. Matthew identifies he is also young. Luke identifies him as a ruler.
2. This man is most likely Jewish seeing his association with the law. His position of ruler would imply regarding a synagogue.
3. He seemed to be sincere but in the wrong thing considering his question he asked Jesus.

B. The improper question, v. 16b.

1. He addresses Jesus as “Good Master.”
2. “What good thing shall I do?”

- a. Is his focus on God or is his focus on self?
- b. This question demonstrates that this man, like all people by nature, had an orientation towards earning eternal life. He wanted to know what good work or noble deed he could do to have eternal life.
- c. Jesus knew his heart and his intentions, and He answers the rich young ruler accordingly.
- d. Many of times Jesus received a question it was intent to trip Him up.
This here was not a case. He was sincere.

3. While he was right to call Jesus Good Master, did he truly understand the extent of that?

C. Jesus responds accordingly, v. 17.

(17) And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.

- 1. He first addresses calling Him “Good Master.”
 - a. He asks “Why do you call me good? There is only one good - God.”
 - b. Jesus here was not denying His own goodness, neither was He denying His deity.
- 2. Some, including Islam have tried to use this as evidence, “see, even Jesus himself denies being God. They falsely have missed the point Jesus is making. In fact, this is clear evidence of Jesus deity.
- 3. Jesus was not denying being good or being God – Jesus was asking the man if he really understood what he was asking and identifying Him as. Jesus is no doubt good.
- 4. You can put this in a deductive argument form.

- A. Only God is good.
- B. Jesus is good.
- C. Therefore, Jesus must be God.

5. He then tells us the man, if thou wilt enter life, keep the commandments.

6. Keep in mind what Jesus just told the man – only God is good.

II. The measure of moral perfection, vv. 18-22.

A. The “good thing” he would need to do, vv. 18-19.

(18) He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, (19) Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

1. He asks Jesus which commandments?

a. As if, keeping some of the commandments but not all of them.

b. Consider what James says. James 2:10-11

(10) For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

(11) For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

c. There is no such thing as keeping the commandments if you don't keep them all.

2. Jesus responds using commandments that deal man to man. We see these in the 10 commandments given to Moses for the Jews in the OT. The first 4 deal with man towards God the next 6 with man towards man.

a. Thou shalt do no murder.

b. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

c. Thou shalt not steal.

- d. Thou shalt not bear false witness,
- e. Honour thy father and thy mother:
- f. He even adds what would be the fulfillment to all of these: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

3. Sounds easy, right?

B. The rich young ruler's response, v. 20.

(20) The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

1. "All these I kept from my youth up. What else do I lack?"

- a. So after Jesus just told him only God is good, guess what this man is essentially saying? "I am good too."
- b. Remember the commandment "Thou shalt not lie?"
- c. Do we see the issue going on here? He already sees himself as good.
- d. Though this rich young ruler would be familiar with Old Testament Scripture, he certainly did not keep these ones in mind.

(1) Isaiah 64:5-6.

(5) Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. (6) But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

(2) Ecclesiastes 7:20.

(20) For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

2. Many of the Pharisees and other Jews thought themselves already to be righteous and good people. In the sermon on the mount Jesus' took the commandments further to show there is no one righteous and good in God's standards.

a. Matthew 5:21-22.

(21) Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: (22) But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

b. Matthew 5:27-28.

(27) Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: (28) But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

3. Are we really to believe here this young rich ruler had the commandments kept?

C. The lack of the rich young ruler (if he hypothetically kept these things), v. 21.

(21) Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

1. Jesus gives him what he would need to do to be perfect. Sell what you have, give it to the poor, and come follow Me.
2. This would be the measure of a true perfect person that is in no need for a Savior.
 - a. Keep the commandments.
 - b. Sell all you have, give it to the poor and follow him.
 - c. This would be the "good thing" you must do if to be good enough for heaven.

3. How many of you here got saved this way? I didn't think it anyone would be raising their hands. Guess how many people have gotten saved this way? Zero.

D. The response from the rich young ruler, v. 22.

(22) And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.

1. In giving up his money, it wouldn't just be money. He would forfeit possessions, status and influence, power, community leadership, and most likely even family.
2. In turning away, he showed he did not love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, neither did he love his neighbor as himself. Money was his god.
3. We today absolutely should be willing to give everything up if God calls us to do so. But this here is not a salvation matter at all. Some of you may have already had to give up many things for the sake of following Jesus. Families turning their backs on you, loss of status and influence. Many have even given up their own lives knowing it would be the death of them.

III. How the impossible is made possible, vv. 23-26.

A. The impossibility of those depending on their riches to enter heaven, vv. 23-24.

(23) Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. (24) And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God

1. Jesus is not teaching here (as some of have falsely concluded) that people who are rich don't go to heaven. The Bible is full of wealthy men who are indeed in Heaven.
2. Those who are dependent on their riches and not God will not be in heaven.
3. You may have heard this phrase "camel to go through the eye of a needle" was

Jesus was speaking of was something called “the Needle Gate”, supposedly a low and narrow after-hours entrance found in the wall surrounding Jerusalem. It was purposely small for security reasons, and a camel could only go through it by stripping off any saddles or packs and crawling through on its knees. The problem with this theory is there is no evidence such a gate ever existed.

Beyond that, what sane camel driver would go through such contortions when larger gates were easily accessible? It also distorts what Jesus is teaching here.

4. The largest animal in Israel, Camels do not squeeze through eyes of needle.

Likewise, is impossible for anyone to be saved on his own merits. No amount of riches will buy your way, no amount of good works.

5. This also shows for a warning for those who have much wealth and possessions. Riches can be a problem because they lead one to be satisfied with this life, instead of longing for the age to come. No need for a savior cause they can have all they want.

6. The rich man so often is blind to his spiritual poverty because he is proud of his accomplishments and has contented himself with his wealth. This is not always the case. It is often falsely quoted that “money is the root of all evil.” It is the “love” of money the Bible says. Not money itself.

7. Many of those who are “poor” as well as rich will not be in heaven because they don’t know Jesus.

B. The logical question asked by the disciples, v. 25.

(25) When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

1. The disciples ask, “who then can be saved?” Even they were able to see through the ruler’s pursuit was impossible.

2. Wealth was commonly mistaken as favor and approval of God taught by many rabbis and other rich. Jesus destroyed this notion, if the rich man cannot do it, how much more hope for the poor? Because truth is, anyone can be saved, both Jew and Gentile, rich or poor, but only through one way. That is Jesus.

C. Only through God is salvation possible, v. 26.

(26) But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

1. It was possible for the rich man to be saved. Not because of his own merits.
2. So, why didn't Jesus just tell the man "believe/trust in me." It is a good question. Would it have made a difference though? Jesus was revealing the heart that day. The man had no interest in Jesus as His Savior – He sought to gain eternal life through his own efforts. Jesus teaches us that is impossible. We don't know what ever happened to the rich young ruler. It would be amazing if one day he recognized there is no good thing he could do to have eternal life but that he would need a savior.

Conclusion

Was Jesus command universal and was this how we get saved? Keeping the commandments, selling what you have, give to the poor and follow Jesus? Our answer obviously is no. If it was yes, Scripture would be in contradiction of itself. Ephesians 2:8-9 (8) For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: (9) Not of works, lest any man should boast. Jesus was not in contradiction to what we find in Scripture. Romans 3:20 tells us; "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." He showed us that no one is good but God and no one can be saved by their own efforts.
