

10 Hard Questions

“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

“be ready in season and out of season...”
(2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)

What Must I Do To Have Eternal Life?

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Matthew 19:16-26

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Introduction:

Well good morning church! It is so good to be with you again today! I’d love for you to open your Bibles to Matthew 19:16-26. This is the last message in our apologetics series called “10 Hard Questions”. We wanted to use this lock down to prepare ourselves – to do our homework as it were – in anticipation of a great season of evangelistic opportunity on the other side. So we hit some doozies – some hard questions. We’ve talked about science, slavery, gender, sexuality, suffering – we even talked about why a loving God would send people to hell. We’ve gone through the deep waters – because we wanted to be prepared. This is sacred work – and I worry because sometimes when we get HERE to this question – all of the sudden we stop doing our homework. We think this is a softball. We think everybody knows this – but that’s not true.

In fact, I think a decent argument could be made that evangelicals in the last 60 years have answered this question WORSE than any other of the 10 we have looked at. We get someone to brink of the kingdom of God and they ask us: “Brother or sister, what must I do to be saved?” and we say, “well pray this little prayer, or sign this card or do this thing and you will be saved.”

But that is not how Jesus handled this question. So let's strap in and let's finish well. We're going to read the story today of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 verses 16-26. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"¹⁷ And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments."¹⁸ He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness,¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²⁰ The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³ And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:16–26 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

It goes without saying that no one was a better evangelist than Jesus. It goes without saying that there is no better example for us to study than the example of Jesus when it comes to dealing with the inquiries of men and women who are beginning to express interest in matters of eternal life and so this morning I want to use this story as a resource, PREPARING US to respond to our friends and loves ones who ask us some version of the question: what must I do to be saved? Or what must I do to have eternal life?

Based on the example of Jesus in this story, I would suggest that you respond in the following way:

When Your Friend Asks You: "What Must I Do To Have Eternal Life?"

First of all:

1. Make sure they understand that the character and commandments of God are the ultimate standard of good and evil

The rich young man approaches Jesus and asks him a question which reflects his own religious pre-suppositions. Many Jews at that time believed that a specific good deed could warrant eternal life¹ so recognizing Jesus as a reliable guide in matters of the kingdom he asks him:

“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16 ESV)

But Jesus, immediately recognizes the wrong assumptions that lie behind the question so he very wisely redirects. He says:

“Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” (Matthew 19:17 ESV)

R.T. France helpfully explains what Jesus is doing here. He says:

“The man’s question had located ‘goodness’ in his proposed ‘good deed’, and so had made it a human quality, as if man were morally self-sufficient. But in absolute terms, only *One is good*; i.e. human ‘goodness’ is relative to the goodness of God, and so goodness is to be found not in our own resources, but in accepting his standards, and reflecting his character.”²

Did you hear that?

Accepting HIS STANDARDS and reflecting HIS CHARACTER.

You see this young man was doing what most human beings do: he was judging himself on the basis of his own internal standards. He was willing to do what he thought was good and he was reasonably certain that he would be doing BETTER THINGS than most other people in his generation, therefore SURELY he would gain entrance into the eternal kingdom – and he expected Jesus to affirm that.

¹ So D.A. Carson, D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13 Through 28* in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 422.

²R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 288.

But of course, Jesus didn't affirm that – because the Bible says he loved this young man, so he told him the truth.

He told him that there is only ONE who is GOOD and therefore it doesn't matter what you think is good or feel is good or believe is good - the only thing that matters is what God SAYS is good. There is no salvation without understanding that - and so he lovingly points this young man toward the commandments.

Which is counter-intuitive isn't it? We don't often think to bring up the commandments in an evangelistic conversation – but we should. Jesus did and Jesus said that it can be quite disastrous for our friends and loved ones if we don't. In perhaps the scariest passage in all the bible, Jesus said:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21–23 ESV)

Apparently on Judgment Day there will be a bunch of people who BELIEVED that they were Christians – who thought they had been led SAVINGLY TO CHRIST – AFTER ALL THEY SAID THE SINNERS PRAYER and they signed the commitment card – and yet apparently they will be told by Jesus himself:

“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:23 ESV)

You *A-NOMIAN* – you LAWLESS PEOPLE. You so called Christians who never acknowledged God's LAW as the standard for human behaviour. According to Jesus, such people are not actually Christians – they are not truly saved and they will be excluded forever – from the coming kingdom of God.

That is horrible to think about – but how could it be otherwise?

When the new heavens and the new earth get started – how could we even think that there would be a bunch of people running around “deciding right and wrong for themselves”?

That’s how we got into this mess in the first place!!

The devil tempted the man and the woman in the Garden to DISREGARD the COMMANDMENT of the Lord and to do what SEEMED RIGHT TO THEM – after all the fruit was PLEASING to the eye and able to make one wise – so the woman took and ate of the fruit and gave some to her husband who was with her. That’s how the world fell under curse and ruin – we FELL by doing what SEEMED RIGHT TO OUR EYES – so obviously, there can be no conversion – THERE CAN BE NO RETURN TO GOD – that does not address that issue head on.

So you must ask your friend – as Jesus asked this young man – whether or not they will BOW before the standard of God’s law.

We must take them to the law!

The old evangelists used to understand that very well. John Wesley, the famous British evangelist and one of the key figures in the first Great Awakening said that when he went into a town he always began by preaching the law. He preached the commandments of God until a spirit of conviction had fallen upon the people and they were crying out under the weight of their sin and the certainty of damnation. THEN and ONLY THEN he preached to them the Gospel of grace. And after they were converted and had started out on the path of faith, he preached the law AGAIN, he said, lest they succumb to sin and folly.

That is the pattern of Gospel ministry and that is precisely how we see Jesus dealing with this young man. Charles Spurgeon says marvellously here:

“The rugged way of works was set before him; not that he might attempt to win eternal life thereby, but that he might perceive his own shortcomings, and so feel his weakness as to look for salvation by some other method.”³

³ Charles Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2013), 277.

Brothers and sisters, the law of God is supposed to break us. The law is the reflection of God's character applied to human life. The law says: be holy as I am holy. Not as you think is holy, not as your friends think is holy. In the law, God says: "Be holy as I am holy!"

We are supposed to look at the law and see GOD! We're supposed to look at the law and see what we should be as IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD. We're supposed to see that – and then to crumble to our knees in recognition of our total, abject failure to be the people we were created and intended to be. We are supposed to respond like the tax collector in Luke 18 who:

"would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" (Luke 18:13 ESV)

According to Jesus – THAT IS THE MAN who went down to his house JUSTIFIED! That is the man who was SAVED!

That was the man PREPARED BY THE LAW to receive grace and mercy from his Creator.

The law is supposed to break us – but it didn't break this young man, so Jesus takes it to the next level – and you might need to do the same with your friends and loved one. If someone asks you how they can be saved or what they must do to inherit eternal life you need to:

2. Make sure they understand that God looks upon the heart and not merely upon the outward performance

Jesus quotes the second table of the law to this young man – the parts about relating to other people - and he caps that off by quoting the Great Commandment, 'love your neighbour as yourself.'

Now – that should have been the knockout blow. That should have absolutely LEVELLED this rich young man. Who among us TRULY LOVES OUR NEIGHBOUR as we love ourselves?

If that is the standard then we are DAMNED!

O God! Have mercy on me a sinner!

That's how this was supposed to go, but AMAZINGLY this young man says to Jesus:

“All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” (Matthew 19:20 ESV)

Apparently, this young man – like so many of his Jewish contemporaries – had a very SUPERFICIAL understanding of the law. Jesus was always having conversations like this with his fellow Jews. There were a lot of Jewish men who felt that they had kept the 7th commandment for example, the one about adultery – until Jesus explained to them what it actually meant:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27–28 ESV)

Do you see what Jesus is doing there? He did this all the time – he taught people what the law of God was really all about. He wanted them to understand that it was not MERELY about perfunctory obedience – as if God were terribly impressed by the fact that you didn't sleep with your neighbour's wife – that's not the bar!!!! Not even close! God wants you to love your own wife and to be enthralled and captivated with her – body, mind and soul – that's what the law was after and so Jesus was always PRESSING THE LAW on people who were trying to DUCK it by hearing it in a superficial way and that's what he is doing here with this rich young ruler.

Do you love your neighbour as yourself – as you have just said that you do? Do you really? Well then, surely you would be willing to sell what you possess and give it to the poor – if you love THEM as much as you love yourself then surely it must BOTHER you to be SO RICH when they are so poor. So why don't you sell your stuff and alleviate some of their suffering.

And the young man went away very sorrowful, for he had many possessions.

You see the law tells us about who God is – most of us know that – but what we tend to forget is that the law also tells God who we are. How we respond to the demands of the law tells God the truth about what's in our hearts – and God wants to know that kind of stuff – so he searches us –

and he uses the law to do it. The law is like a glass that God presses down on us in order to see and discover what's inside.

Listen, friends, how you react to the TRUE DEMANDS of the law – tells the truth about who you are. If you bow – if you surrender – if you break and confess that you are a terrible sinner then you are very close to the kingdom of God.

“a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51:17 KJV)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3 ESV)

That's what Jesus wanted – that's what he was going for with his brother - but that's not what he got, because the rich young man wasn't there. D.A. Carson says bluntly:

“He had a divided heart. His money was competing with God; and what Jesus everywhere demands as a condition for eternal life is absolute, radical discipleship”⁴

“You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24 ESV)

So Jesus pressures this brother and he bolts.

Listen, very practically, you need to help your friends understand that God does not generally take people at their word. You can say whatever you like - God will press, God will probe and God will discover the state of your heart. He'll use the law – if you read the Bible – if you study the commands of God you will find one that rubs up painfully against your secret loves and hidden idols. It will happen – I promise you that.

But it might not always be about the money. I trust you understand that there is more than one potential idol in the human heart. It wasn't about the money for Abraham. Abraham, as you will recall, was FILTHY RICH and yet, did God tell Abraham to put his money on the alter? Nope. He told him to put his son on the alter.

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13 Through 28* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 424.

Abraham's idol was his family and so God pressed on that.

God will press on anything and everything in order to determine the true state of your heart – and your friend ought to know that. That ought to be part of your “closing conversation” – because it certainly was for Jesus.

He made sure this brother understood that his idol had to GO – and hearing that, the young man went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions.

And that is the part of the story we don't like. We think Jesus should have gone after him, and he should have said something to make him feel better, but of course Jesus doesn't do that and neither should you do that and that's our third and final lesson from this story. When our friends ask us what is involved in truly becoming a Christian we must:

3. Never, ever, EVER lower the bar

Jesus never lowered the bar. He kept it impossibly high. He said:

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48 ESV)

So Jesus never lowered the bar – and he certainly didn't lower the bar in this story. He told the disciples plainly:

“Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:23–26 ESV)

Do you see what he is doing here? He is breaking them of their pride and self-reliance SO AS TO POSITION them to receive mercy and kindness from Almighty God.

That is how you lead people to Jesus!

That is how you help your friends and loved ones find the doggy door into the Kingdom of Heaven. As long as your friends thinks that they DESERVE IT or that they can EARN IT or that they can NEGOTIATE IT then they aren't ready to receive it from God as a gift of Sovereign grace.

Your friends need to stand broken and humbled before the awesome holiness of God.

Until they understand who GOD IS and who THEY ARE they will never understand or appreciate who Jesus is or what Jesus did to secure their salvation on the cross. And until your friend sees that – until they understand that – until they let go of everything else they are hanging on to in order to take hold of that - there can BE NO SALVATION.

And so that's why – for the sake of our friends and loved ones – we must never, ever, EVER lower the bar.

The bar is where it's supposed to be. It has been positioned by God to pierce the heart of sinful, stubborn, rebellious man and to drive him to the cross for salvation.

Now in the time that we have left I just want to make two very simple and I hope very practical applications. The first one I direct at my fellow believers in Christ – based on what we've seen in the text today, I want to encourage you brothers and sisters to read the Word of God with your unsaved friends and loved ones.

Two Applications:

1. Brother, sister, read the Word of God with your friends and loved ones

I remember visiting an older pastor friend when I was just starting out in ministry. We were going to go out for lunch as I recall but we met first in his office at the church. While I was waiting for him to be ready I happened to notice a large and colourful set of books that I had never seen before and I began to look at them and to explore them a little. It was some kind of narrative commentary set but it was disproportionately focused on the Old Testament. It was something like 25 volumes and only the very last one seemed to focus on a NT Gospel – so I asked my friend

about it and he told me that it was a special resource that had been created specifically for pioneer missionaries. Its intention was to help missionaries READ and TEACH the stories of the Old Testament by way of preparing people to put their faith in Jesus Christ – and I had never heard of such a thing.

You see here in North America we almost always want to start with the Gospels. We want to go right to the good stuff. We take them to the Gospel of John or the Gospel of Mark – and many people have been won to Christ that way – but as our culture begins to lose its memory of biblical truth – I wonder if that old pioneer missionary approach might not be better suited to our new situation. I wonder if as our culture changes and as our moral assumptions shift – I wonder if what we really need to do is start with the Old Testament. Start with Genesis, Exodus even Leviticus. Maybe we need to read a book like that with our friends and loved ones. At the very least it will FORCE them to wrestle with the very same things that Jesus forced the rich young man to wrestle with in the story that we read today.

Who decides right and wrong?

What's the standard?

Who is your God and where is your hidden idol?

You'll get to those questions pretty quick if you're reading the Old Testament together won't you?

And then if your friend is broken – if they are humbled – if they are desperate – then of course you take them to Jesus – you take them to the cross!

That's how the Apostles did it. That's how the old missionaries do it. Maybe that's how we should do it again today.

So that's my practical suggestion for you – based on this text. Ask a friend or loved one to read Genesis or Exodus – use the Into the Word podcast. We have all of Genesis and Exodus covered – and God willing, we're going to do Leviticus next year – so use that. Go through those books with

a friend and then when you're done – or when they fall under conviction and you sense that the time is right - take them to Jesus.

My second application is for any of those unsaved friends and loved ones who might be listening on today. To you I would like to suggest this. If you have been pierced this morning; if you have despaired of your own righteousness; if you have understood today that you cannot build a stairway to heaven and that it is IMPOSSIBLE for you to save yourself then, my dear friend: **PRAY TO THE LORD AND ASK HIM TO PULL YOU - BROKEN, BRUISED and BLEEDING IF NECESSARY – THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE** and into the kingdom of EVERLASTING LIFE.

2. Friend, loved one, ask God to pull you, broken, bruised and bleeding, into eternal life

That is the only appropriate response that I can think of to what Jesus has just said. He just said:

“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26 ESV)

So – you can't do this – but God can. He can reach through the eye of the needle, grab you by the hair on your head and pull you through.

It's going to hurt. It's like being born again. You're going to come out naked, bloody and screaming – on the side, but it's going to be worth it. Because Jesus is over there – and life and glory and beauty forevermore.

So if you want that – if you want Jesus and life evermore - then I invite you to pray with me now. Let's do that. Close your eyes and let me lead you. Let's pray together:

“O God – have mercy on me a sinner! You are God. You are truth. You are right and I am fallen. Please forgive me on the basis of who Jesus is and what he has done for me in his life, his death and resurrection. God help me! Change me. Heal me. Restore me. Make me like Jesus. Fill me with his Spirit! O God, I am ready to receive these things from you now – and whatever else you

would give me - in Christ – through faith – and for your glory. I pray this now in Jesus’ name,
amen.”

Amen. Brother Jody, will you come and lead us?