

The Gospel as Preached by Jesus
Matthew 19:16-30
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Increasingly in our culture, the moral values of professedly born-again Christians seem to differ little from the moral values of our sinful culture. I believe one of the reasons for this serious problem is the way the gospel is often being presented in America today. I have two criticisms of popular evangelism today. First, gospel presentation in America has become man-centered instead of God-centered. The emphasis has shifted from the glory and honor of God to the happiness of humanity. Yes, the gospel brings people many benefits such as forgiveness and inner joy, but we mustn't present the gospel as if it is merely a self-help technique or a desirable consumer product. Evangelism should stress who God is and not merely what God can do for us. When we present the gospel, we need to remind people of God's high and holy nature. The gospel is a sincere and loving offer, but it is also a divine command. And it is fearfully presumptuous to neglect a divine command.

Second, gospel presentation in America too easily identifies outward professions with saving faith. A person walks an aisle or recites a written prayer or signs a card, and then he is told in no uncertain terms that he has eternal life. The problem is that people are always looking for some easy something they can do to insure their salvation without its interfering with the lives. For too many, that is what making a public decision for Christ has become. We need to stress that saving faith bears certain fruits

such as repentance and new obedience. These fruits grow and mature over time, but they are also evident from the very beginning of faith's inception in the heart. A profession of faith with no evidence of faith's necessary fruits is not a credible profession. We are saved by grace through faith alone, but saving faith never exists alone apart from any spiritual fruit.

With that introduction, let's now look at the account of the rich young ruler and examine the evangelism technique of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We will see that our Lord here presents the gospel in a way that both exalts God and stresses the necessary fruits of genuine faith. But before we look at our Lord's technique, let's first take note of the rich young ruler himself. Matthew begins the account of the rich young ruler with the words, "Now behold." That is way of saying that he is about to tell us about something quite remarkable that happened. From Mark's account, we learn that when Jesus was walking on a public road, the rich young ruler ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him. The rich young ruler was eager (he ran), reverent (he knelt before Jesus), and bold (he did this in a public place). Matthew tells us that the man was materially rich, and Luke tells us that he was a ruler, a term which probably refers to a prominent office in a synagogue. These achievements are all the more impressive in that he was a young man. He was also a moral and upright individual. He could publicly say without fear of contradiction that, in terms of external obedience, he had kept the basic law of God all his life. He erred, as did the Pharisees in general, in thinking that he could earn salvation by living a holy life and in equating outward obedience to God's law with the whole of obedience. Yet he did not have the blind confidence of the unconverted Paul (Saul of Tarsus) who had as a Pharisee

viewed himself as blameless concerning the righteousness that is found in the law. Nor did he have the arrogance of the Pharisee we read about in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

Luke 18:11-12

- 11 "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.
- 12 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'"

In contrast, the rich young ruler sensed that he lacked something, that his own personal righteousness was not sufficient to gain him heaven. He came to Jesus in earnest sincerity and asked, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

Now here is where we are surprised at Jesus' response. Our tendency would be to tell the young man that all he needs to do is to pray a prayer and to make a profession of faith. No doubt the young man would have done that. Jesus did not, however, take that approach. Jesus saw through the facade and the flattery which would have fooled us, and addressed the deficiencies in this young man's attitude. Instead of giving him assurances, Jesus gave this young man a rebuke and a challenge.

First, let us look at the rebuke. Jesus, who knows all men and who knows what is in man, saw a self-centered imbalance in the rich young ruler. The rich young ruler came with a psychological need for security but with no sense of having offended a holy God. The rich young ruler also came with the

hope that he could by his own efforts earn and deserve eternal life. He viewed himself as having kept God's law, but he wanted Jesus to tell him something beyond this which he could do to gain a sense of security that he did indeed possess eternal life. He came flattering Jesus, calling Jesus "Good Teacher," with the hope that this would influence Jesus to tell him what he wanted to hear. He wanted to hear that there was some little additional thing he could do to satisfy his nagging doubts and to give him a sense of eternal security.

Jesus responded by turning the focus to God. Jesus said, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God." Jesus' purpose here was simply to take the attention of the rich young ruler away from his self-centered focus on himself and to shift it onto God instead. The rich young ruler asked about eternal life, and God alone is the source of eternal life. In John 17:3, Jesus said in His high priestly prayer,

3 "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

This question about eternal life brings one into the very presence of God. When we come into the presence of God, we should sense our own sin and unworthiness. When the prophet Isaiah was caught up into the presence of God in a vision, He cried out,

Isaiah 6:5

5 ... "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

God is the ultimate standard of goodness, and no one can see God in all His holy splendor without recognizing his own sinful deficiency. No one can have a vision of God's glory and think that there is anything good he can do to earn or deserve eternal life.

The rich young ruler needed to think not in terms of his own psychological need for security but in terms of his sins as an offense to a holy God. The rich young ruler needed to think not in terms of his presumed ability to do something good but in terms of his need for God's mercy.

Jesus then said, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." Only God is good, and God has explained His standard of good in His commandments. The rich young ruler then asked, "Which commandments?" Christ responded by quoting some commandments from the second table of the law and by quoting the summary of the second table of the law. The first table has to do with our responsibility toward God, and the second table with our responsibility toward our fellow man. The summary of the second table of the law is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus quoted this to him.

There are two ways we can look at keeping God's law. We can look at it legalistically. This means keeping God's law perfectly, never transgressing it in thought, word or deed, and then demanding that we deserve eternal life. The problem with this legalistic view of the law is that no human has ever kept God's law flawlessly, perfectly, with the exception of Jesus. With the exception of Jesus, every human who has ever lived has broken God's holy law and thus deserved not eternal life but God's

judgment against sin. The rich young ruler viewed keeping God's law in this legalistic sense, and he needed to realize that no one can inherit eternal life that way.

There is a second way we can look at keeping God's law. We can also look at keeping God's law in terms of the enabling and forgiving grace of God. If we have a faith relationship with Jesus, then Jesus is going to enable us to keep God's law as a way of life. Now notice carefully that I said that Jesus enables us to keep God's law as a way of life, not as a way of salvation. There is a big difference. I'm not saying that the Christian never sins. I'm not saying that the Christian keeps God's law perfectly. I am saying that Jesus enables His people to keep God's law in general as a way of life, and that Jesus also forgives the sin which still clings even to their best efforts to obey God.

Ephesians 2:10

10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Hebrews 8:10

10 ... I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Titus 2:14

14 [our great God and Savior Jesus Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

1 John 2:3-4

- 3 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.
- 4 He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

If we have a faith relationship with Jesus, then Jesus will enable us to live a life which goes beyond the superficial righteousness of religious hypocrites. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:20

- 20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

The rich young ruler had not kept God's law either as a way of life or as a way of salvation. He certainly had not kept it perfectly as a way of avoiding God's judgment against sin. As I have said, no one has done that, with the exception of Jesus. He also had not kept God's law as a way of life which flows from and demonstrates a faith relationship with Jesus. We can bear this fruit of obedience only by abiding in Christ. Apart from Him, we can do nothing.

That brings us to our next point, and that is Jesus' challenge. The rich young ruler thought he had kept God's law perfectly as a way of earning eternal life. Yet he still sensed that something was lacking. We see this in his response to Jesus:

Matthew 19:20

20 The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?"

Jesus did not argue with the young man's claim about having kept God's law. Jesus could have pointed out, as He had in the Sermon on the Mount, that keeping God's law involves more than outward conformity. It also involves inner attitudes and thoughts and motives. In this sense, no one other than Jesus has ever succeeded in keeping God's law perfectly. Jesus did not argue this point but instead gave the rich young ruler a challenge. Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." Jesus gave him the challenge of faith, but Jesus did not stop there. True faith bears the fruit of new obedience, and Jesus gave the rich young ruler a command:

21 Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

The rich young ruler had hoped for some easy task he could do to give him security, something like signing a card or walking an aisle. Instead Jesus required of him as the necessary fruit of a faith relationship, total surrender. In most cases, of course, Jesus does not require people to sell all their goods and give them to the poor. Jesus did in this case. The rich young ruler was in bondage to earthly riches as an idol, and Jesus commanded him to rid himself of this idol. The rich young ruler had claimed that he truly loved his neighbor as himself, and Jesus commanded him to demonstrate this by giving to his neighbor in need. The rich young ruler wanted eternal life, but he loved his riches

more. He walked away from Jesus in sorrow that he could not have both.

In order to better understand this, we need to contrast the experience of the rich young ruler with the experience of another rich man:

Luke 19:1-10

- 1 Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.
- 2 Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich.
- 3 And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature.
- 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way.
- 5 And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house."
- 6 So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully.
- 7 But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner."
- 8 Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold."
- 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham;
- 10 "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Both Zacchaeus and the rich young ruler were rich. The difference between them was the grace of God. 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. But what is impossible for men is possible for God.

Salvation is by grace through faith unto good works. Salvation is a free gift, but a part of that gift is a new life. We are saved through faith alone, but the faith that saves bears the fruits of repentance and new obedience. We know that faith is genuine when we see its bearing fruit in the lives of those who profess to have it.

The rich young ruler came to Jesus thinking he could pay the price for salvation. He thought he could purchase salvation by keeping the law. He left Jesus aware that much less than being able to pay the price for salvation, he was not even willing to pay the consequences of being saved. A faith relationship with Jesus would necessarily result in freedom from his bondage to greed and materialism, and he did not want to be freed. He left Jesus sorrowful and still in bondage to his sin.

Let me put this a different way using some classic theological terms. The rich young ruler came to Jesus thinking he could meet the conditions of the covenant of works. He left Jesus aware that he couldn't even fulfill the obligations of the covenant of grace. The obligations of the covenant of grace are faith and faith's inevitable and necessary fruits, repentance and new obedience.

No one can look into his own heart and see his faith. No one can look into heaven and see if his name is indeed written in the Book of Life. Yet anyone can look at his life and see if there is any evidence of faith's necessary fruits. Is there repentance? Is there a pursuit of new obedience? These do not save us, but they do give evidence that we know the Savior. If we abide in Him, we will bear much fruit. Apart from Him, we can do nothing.