

The Proud Rich Young Ruler

Matthew 19:16-26

Why did the rich young ruler approach Jesus Christ? In his arrogance, the rich young ruler assumed that salvation is obtained by one's own righteousness; in his case, by keeping the Mosaic Law (which he assumed to have kept perfectly), and many of the Jewish traditions found in the Mishnah as well. This man did not come to the Lord to seek salvation, but to receive confirmation from someone whom he and many others considered an authority regarding theological matters. Many people ask questions not because they are seeking answers, but to have their own beliefs substantiated by another authority.

This religious man had great pride related to his pseudo self-righteousness; he was a legalist, a person who believed in earning salvation through keeping moral and religious laws; and above all he was a person who considered himself perfect, though the Lord will soon reveal him as imperfect. His pride based on his pseudo righteousness had made him completely anti-grace in his thinking and orientation. Thus, the first step in breaking through this anti-grace barrier would be for the Lord to smash the young man's image of himself as being perfectly righteous. So, Jesus commanded him to give all of his money and possessions away. Did the Lord actually expect this unbeliever to obey this command? No, of course he didn't! When the rich young ruler realized that he couldn't obey this command, he should have come to the conclusion that he was not perfect. With this realization, he should then have asked the Lord for a grace solution. If he had, the Lord would have given him the gospel message.

Not only was this person proud of his righteousness, but he was also quite successful and therefore quite self-sufficient. Self-sufficient people have a hard time depending upon grace. This man obtained rulership and wealth at a relatively young age. As a ruler, this man was probably a member of the Pharisees, and apparently very intelligent. Also, it appears that he was an aggressive, diligent businessman who had acquired great wealth (Mark uses the Greek word 'ktema' in this way (Mk. 10:22) based on the verb 'ktaomai' to acquire, to produce for oneself). So here is an accomplished person; a man that never had to depend upon others for anything. Sometimes people of this category have a hard time understanding and accepting grace-gifts.

The Mosaic Law was divided into three parts: the Ten Commandments (Codex 1); Christology and soteriology, the theological code designed to present Jesus Christ as the only Savior (Codex 2); and the establishment code (Codex 3). The first and third portions demanded a righteousness that no human being born with a sin nature could keep perfectly. Thus, the major purpose of these two portions of the Mosaic Law was to demonstrate to the Jewish people that they could not keep the Law perfectly since they were sinners, unrighteous and imperfect (Rom. 3:20-22; 7:7; Gal. 2:16; 3:24, 25). Once a person understood this, then he would see the need to obtain God's imputed righteousness through the work of Christ on the cross, presented by the second portion of the Mosaic Law which included the animal sacrifices that represented and taught of Christ's death on the cross. Unfortunately, this arrogant young man could not understand this simple truth.

Matthew 19:16, 17: Now behold a man came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good shall I do to obtain eternal life?" And He replied to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good [What good shall I do]? There is only one who is [intrinsic, absolute] good [and so qualified to provide salvation]. If you desire to enter into [eternal] life [through your righteousness], and you do [first class conditional sentence], then keep the commandments [impossible for man to gain salvation by keeping God's commandments, Matt. 19:26b].

The Greek word 'agathos' means intrinsic good, absolute good. When a believer uses God's power in the execution of the spiritual life, he produces this good as in the case of Joseph of

Arimathea in Luke 23:50-51, “a good [agathos] and righteous man.” Barnabas was called a “good man” since he was both filled with the Spirit and walked by faith, according to Acts 11:22-24. Morality and the Laws of Establishment are good (agathos) since they are from God (Romans 13:3). So, whenever the Greek word ‘agathos’ appears in the New Testament, it is always related to divine good in one way or another.

However, there was only one intrinsically good person who was able to accomplish the work for eternal life, the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man. He accomplished this work by means of the power of the filling ministry of the Holy Spirit and the constant application of doctrine under the greatest imaginable pressure. However, this extremely arrogant young man in effect, tells Jesus that He doesn’t need to go to the cross since he, the young ruler is able to obtain eternal life on his own. So, even though he asks the following question, “Teacher, what good shall I do to obtain eternal life?” he really was not seeking an answer, but seeking confirmation from a respected authority. Since the Lord realizes that this was a debate, he answers a question with a question - “Why do you call me good? No one is [intrinsic, absolute] good—except God alone.” Jesus Christ answered those who were seeking salvation in one way, but those who were not in another way. Also, by this question the Lord is probing to see if he understood anything about the virgin birth, His hypostatic union, impeccability, the perfection of the God-Man, and how all of these doctrines relate to redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, justification and imputation. In any case, the young wealthy man apparently knew very little of these doctrines and for sure was not interested in salvation through Jesus Christ. Worst yet, when Jesus stated that there is only one who is good, this young man’s attitude and subsequent statements would imply that he understood himself to be that one good person.

Matthew 19:18-20: The man inquired, “Which ones?” Jesus replied, “You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness [in court]; You shall honor your father and mother, and you shall love those in your periphery [the ones a person has contact with on a daily basis] as yourself.” And the young man answered, “All these, I have guarded. What do I still lack?”

Since the young man thinks that he is as good as the God-Man, the Lord commanded him to keep all the commandments which only the Lord Jesus Christ could do. He flippantly asks “which ones?” He has complete confidence that he has kept all the Commandments perfectly. The first five commandments the Lord mentioned require only human morality to fulfill them, and so it is possible even for an unbeliever to execute them. However, the last one (loving your neighbor as yourself) requires virtue, a virtue that only the spiritual life of a great believer could manufacture (in blind arrogance, a person first deceives himself and then lies to others.) When the young man stated that he had loved his neighbor as himself, it is deceitfulness and a glossed over slimy lie.

Matthew 19:21: And Jesus said to him, “If you desire to be perfect and you do [though it is impossible since you are not God], go and sell your possessions and give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven then [return] here and follow Me [in regeneration: Matthew 19:28].” Matthew 19:22: After the young man heard the instruction, he departed grieving for he possessed a lot of property.

If a mature believer were extremely wealthy, and if it were God’s will for him to give all of his wealth away and become totally destitute in order to demonstrate that he loved his neighbor as himself, that man could do so for the mature believer has the necessary virtue love to execute such a difficult command, as Barnabas had demonstrated (Acts 4:36, 37). However, the Lord does not expect an unbeliever to do this, for no unbeliever has the virtue to “love his neighbor as himself”. Rather, the Lord wanted him to realize that he could not keep the Mosaic Law perfectly since he was not perfect, and instead turn to the perfect One, placing his faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. However, this man’s arrogance is too extreme. He is not only a self-righteous legalist, but also a

totally self-sufficient wealthy businessman. Since the Lord could not break through his wall of legalism, the next step will be to remove all of his wealth through national disaster. This is quite likely what happened to him when the Romans put down the Jewish Revolt from 68-70 A.D.

To help us understand Matthew 19:21 let us put it in Chronological order. “And Jesus said to him, “If you desire to be perfect and you do [though it is impossible since you are not God], go and sell your possessions and give them to the poor, then [after you have realized that you cannot execute this command and oriented to my gospel message] return here and follow Me [in regeneration: Matthew 19:28], and you will have treasure in heaven.” (Jesus answered his question as found in Mark 10:17).

Matthew 19:23: Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly, I say to you that a rich man will with great difficulty enter into the kingdom of Heaven.”

Wealthy people do become believers in the same way that any unbeliever becomes a believer though they have difficulty in believing in Christ because they have a tendency to depend upon their wealth for their security and as their problem solving device (wealthy people tend to develop this attitude of self dependence and self-sufficiency, even unbeknown to themselves) Also, they are so busy making, keeping, and enjoying their money, or even worrying over it, that they give very little thought to eternal matters and to the gospel (Mark 8:36-38; 1Timothy 6:11-17; James 5:1-6). The next verse illustrates this difficulty:

Matthew 19:24: And again I say to 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 [synonymous with the kingdom of heaven].”

In the cities of the ancient world, the main gate or gates would be closed in the evening and not opened until the next day. However, if some traveler should arrive when the main gate was closed, he and his animals could be brought into the city via a small door in the gate. This small opening was called the eye of the needle. It was especially difficult to push a camel through this opening for a camel would need to get down on his knees and then be pulled and shoved through. Furthermore, since camels don't like doing something they don't want to do and have a nasty personality to boot, it was very difficult to get them through the hole, though not impossible.

Matthew 19:25-26. When His disciples heard, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked on them and said to them, “With men this is impossible [it is impossible for mankind to save himself], but with God all things are possible [including salvation by grace].”

That was the very point that the Lord was trying to point out to the rich young ruler, namely that unrighteous mankind needs a Mediator who will go to the Cross and provide what mankind can never provide. On the other hand, with God all things are possible even providing salvation for totally sinful, helpless, unworthy mankind.