

## Chapter 78: Treasure in Heaven

*Matthew 19:16–22*

While Jesus' recent subjects of marriage, divorce, and children (Matt. 19:1–15) have hit very close to home, Jesus knows that some of the most selfish things relate to our possessions. While we can behave terribly toward those people who are closest to us, there is a more subtle kind of sin that lurks beneath the surface of our lives in our inordinate desires for what we own. While we may fool many around us (including ourselves!) to believe that we are really good people, God sees the sinful covetousness of our hearts. So, in Matthew 19:16–22, Jesus commands you to *lay up for yourself treasure in heaven*.

### The Inadequacy of our Good Deeds (Matt. 19:16–17a)

Matthew does not tell us precisely how much time has elapsed since blessing the little children when the rich man in this passage comes to visit him (Matt. 19:13–15, 16). The word “behold,” however, suggests a sudden intrusion on the scene, so that Matthew likely means for us to understand that these two stories happen in very close sequence. Furthermore, it is likely that Matthew is tying together Jesus' teaching on marriage, children, and possessions as a common theme dealing with the most basic parts of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

When this man arrives to speak with Jesus, we are given very few details about him.<sup>2</sup> We learn later that he is a “young man” who “had great possessions” (v. 22), but Matthew keeps those details hidden for the moment. Furthermore, Luke 18:18 tells us that he is a “ruler,” which is “probably a synagogue official.”<sup>3</sup> In crafting the story with so few details, we experience this interaction in much the same way as the original audience would have, without knowing exactly what was going on in the life and the heart of this earnest man. Those details will come out only in Jesus' precise pastoral care for him.

Thus, the focus of our attention falls entirely on the question that this nondescript man poses to Jesus: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (v. 16b). There are two aspects to this question that Jesus must expose as faulty. First, as Lenski writes, this question carries “the assumption that the questioner has the necessary ability and may easily reach the goal Jesus has

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 723. Hendriksen believes that the parallel passage in Mark 10:16–17 more clearly suggests a close chronological sequence, but I think that Matthew's “behold” is a bit clearer on that point.

<sup>2</sup> “Matthew cannot be said to have exerted himself to give us information about the man who came to him, confining himself to the single word *one*. Since the Greek word is masculine, we can say that the person who came was male, but that is all.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 488.)

<sup>3</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 296.

reached. He feels that all he needs to know is the thing that is to be done.”<sup>4</sup> Second, and more fundamentally, this question believes that our salvation lies in something that we must *do*. This underestimates both the infinitely high demands of the kingdom of heaven that entirely rules out any possibility of earning eternal life (Matt. 5:21–48), and it misleads “the path of discipleship which entails the ‘greater righteousness’ that God requires and which is the way to ‘eternal life.’”<sup>5</sup>

It is essential to recognize these fundamental errors in the man’s question if we are to understand Jesus’ response. Jesus is not giving a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. Rather, he rejects the premises of the question, so his answer is aimed less at answering the question, and more toward getting the man to recognize the folly bound up in his question. Jesus approaches these errors in two ways, beginning by first interrogating what the man means by “good”: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good” (v. 17a). Here, Jesus points to God as the infinite source and standard of “the good.” Some, in thinking that Jesus is giving a straightforward answer to a straightforward question, believe that Jesus is here acknowledging that *he* is not good—and, if so, that he is not God. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. As Blomberg writes, “Jesus is not admitting his own sinfulness or hinting at his deity. The rich man would have appreciated neither of these points. Rather, he is diverting attention from the young man’s inadequate criteria for entering into life and focusing on the standard of divine goodness.”<sup>6</sup> So, Jesus is not so much *hinting* at his deity as confronting the man with a question that will ultimately demand him to *recognize* his deity. To do so, however, will first require the man to recognize the inadequacy of any good deed that he might do.

## The Internal Demands of the Law (Matt. 19:17b–20)

If Jesus’ first approach focused on the *personal* goodness of God, his second approach is to direct this man’s attention to the revealed goodness of God in *the law*: “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (v. 17b). The pastoral wisdom of Jesus in this moment becomes apparent in the man’s response to Jesus’ question: “Which ones?” (v. 18a). Through Jesus’ questions, we come to recognize that this man is trying to figure out a shortcut to righteousness. He does not recognize the infinitely high standards of God’s righteousness (Matt. 5:48), and neither does he recognize that to break the law in one place is tantamount to violating the whole law (Jas. 2:10). Rather, he is trying to find some kind of law-within-the-law, the *real* commandments that God demands, as opposed to the optional commandments that are not as weighty.

Jesus’ answer, then, must have come—at first—as a relief to this man: ““You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 18b–19). Jesus does not list out all of the Ten Commandments, but not because Jesus is advocating a standard that may exclude the missing commandments. Rather, Jesus is helping this man tease out the implications of his question, “Which ones?” Jesus wants to show that the man has not, and cannot, keep all the commandments quantitatively (not every single command), which he will then use to show the man that he also has

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<sup>4</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 747.

<sup>5</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 732.

<sup>6</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 297.

not, and cannot, keep all the commandments qualitatively (not any command to the fullest degree that it requires).

So, two observations may be made about the commandment list that Jesus gives here. First, Jesus cites only the commandments from the Second Table of the Law, as summarized by the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). Second, even in the Second Table of the Law, Jesus omits the Tenth Commandment against coveting. As France writes, these commandments “all concern observable behavior toward other people rather than the more ‘inward’ focus of the first four commandments about our attitude to God and of the prohibition of coveting....Taken at face value (rather than in the more nuanced way in which Jesus interprets the Decalogue commands in 5:21–30 and the neighbor-command in Luke 10:29–37), these OT precepts aptly sum up a conventional Jewish view of what it means to be good.”<sup>7</sup> Outwardly, the man could boast having kept all of these commandments (v. 20a). What he lacked, however, was the inward spiritual transformation that these commandments require (v. 20b).

We see Jesus hinting, then, at an important principle about a right understanding of the law: “That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.”<sup>8</sup> Obedience to the law, then, cannot be confined to the mere external keeping of the law. Moreover, Jesus is hinting at an important clue to this principle by omitting the First Table of the Law and the Tenth Commandment against covetousness. Paul elsewhere states that covetousness “*is idolatry*” (Col. 3:5, emphasis added; cf. Eph. 5:5). Thus, the capstone of the Second Table of the Law connects back to the beginning of the Law in the First Table. These commandments show that the Law drives deeply to matters of the heart, so that just as soon as you think you have successfully worked your way through the Second Table’s external requirements, the Ten Commandments not only search out the desires of your heart, but take you back to the beginning of the Ten Commandments to start over again. Indeed, Paul also explains that he himself would not have known what the Law really required apart from the Tenth Commandment against covetousness, since that Commandment exposed all the sinful desires of his heart (Rom. 7:7).<sup>9</sup> This man seems to know that he is lacking something, but he believes that his lack stems from a failure to do some big thing for God, rather than for his failure to have done all that God has already required. The Law, therefore, makes internal demands as well as external demands.

## The Irrationality of our Desires (Matt. 19:21–22)

Jesus does not long neglect the duties required by the Tenth Commandment. After this man reveals his inadequate views of the requirements of the Law, Jesus exposes his shortcoming by the phrase, “If you would be perfect...” (v. 21a). This word *perfect* points to the necessity of “wholeheartedness in God’s service. The young man had felt a need (v. 20); Jesus points him to wholeness, completeness.”<sup>10</sup> Specifically, this wholeheartedness demands that that our covetousness be crucified with Christ, a need that Jesus identifies by the particular test he gives to the man: “...go,

<sup>7</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 734.

<sup>8</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #99.2.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:396–97.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 491.

sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (v. 21b). Lenski, writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, notes that, “The answer is surprising, and this surprise has lasted these 1900 years.”<sup>11</sup> What, though, does Jesus mean by this?

First, Jesus is rather exposing the covetousness of the man’s heart in a way that he does intend for all his disciples. Calvin’s comments are worth quoting:

For though the law nowhere obliges us to sell all, yet as it represses all sinful desires, and teaches us to *bear the cross*, as it bids us be prepared for hunger and poverty, the *young man* is very far from keeping it fully, so long as he is attached to his riches, and burns with covetousness. And he says that *one thing is wanting*, because he does not need to preach to him about fornication and murder, but to point out a particular disease, as if he were laying his finger on the sore.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Jesus is not merely demanding external conformity to the law, but a radical internal transformation: “Jesus is demanding no mere outward act which would be as valueless as the other acts of this man have been. The outward act is to be merely the evidence of the inner change.”<sup>13</sup>

Second, Jesus is not laying down an absolute rule for all disciples to follow. Elsewhere, the Scripture commands that the rich should not necessarily give away everything, but that they must “be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:18). Again, Hendriksen’s comments are worth quoting at length:

The demand which Jesus had made on this bewildered man was suited to his particular circumstances and state of mind. The Lord does not ask every rich person—for example Abraham (Gen. 13:2), or Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57)—to do exactly this same thing. There are those opulent individuals who, speaking by and large, are living for themselves. What they contribute to the cause of others is wholly out of proportion to what they keep for themselves. There are other wealthy persons, however, who are willing to go all out in helping others, including even the ungenerous (Gen. 13:7–11; 14:14); and who, motivated by gratitude, are constantly building altars and bringing offerings to God (Gen. 12:8; 13:18; 15:10–12; 22:13).<sup>14</sup>

We cannot, then, extrapolate a strict necessity to sell all of our possessions in the same way the Law imposes a strict necessity to have no other gods but the Lord, to make no graven images, to avoid taking the Lord’s name in vain, to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, to honor father and mother, to avoid murder, adultery, theft, and the bearing of false witness, and to put to death covetousness.

Third, while Jesus does not demand as a fixed requirement of disciples that we must sell all our

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<sup>11</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 751.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:397.

<sup>13</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 752.

<sup>14</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 727.

property to give it to the poor, we are not let off the hook that easily. As Johann Bengel, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran scholar observes, “If the Lord had said, Thou art rich, and art too fond of thy riches, the young man would have denied it.”<sup>15</sup> Craig Blomberg also provides two quotations which “should cause some soul-searching” and are therefore worth reproducing.<sup>16</sup> The first is from Hermann Ridderbos, who writes, “The man of course did not think that his riches were worth more than eternal life, but he must have told himself that he did not really have to give up his wealth to gain it.”<sup>17</sup> Then, Robert Guidry has written, “That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command.”<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, this passage does not leave us with the false choice that has marked the interpretation of this passage through the ages, as summarized by France: “The history of the interpretation of this passage is divided between the unconventional minority who take v. 21 as a literal prescription which applies to every disciple and so rules out the acquisition or retention of private property, and the ‘bourgeois’ majority who look for exegetically responsible ways to avoid a literal application of v. 21 to disciples in general.”<sup>19</sup> We avoid both of these errors by focusing on two key concepts.

To start, we must never forget that everything we possess comes by God’s grace and should be received with gratitude. The *Westminster Larger Catechism*’s question regarding the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer is instructive of the kind of attitude that should characterize our relationship with our possessions:

In the fourth petition (which is, *Give us this day our daily bread*), acknowledging that in Adam, and by our own sin, we have forfeited our right to all the outward blessings of this life, and deserve to be wholly deprived of them by God, and to have them cursed to us in the use of them; and that neither they of themselves are able to sustain us, nor we to merit, or by our own industry to procure them; but prone to desire, get, and use them unlawfully: we pray for ourselves and others, that both they and we, waiting upon the providence of God from day to day in the use of lawful means, may, of his free gift, and as to his fatherly wisdom shall seem best, enjoy a competent portion of them; and have the same continued and blessed unto us in our holy and comfortable use of them, and contentment in them; and be kept from all things that are contrary to our temporal support and comfort.<sup>20</sup>

Then, we must recognize that all of us are indeed called to surrender our possession to God—not necessarily by divesting ourselves of those possessions, but by stewarding those possessions for the kingdom. Craig Blomberg puts this well:

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<sup>15</sup> Cited by Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 559.

<sup>16</sup> Both these citations appear in Blomberg, *Matthew*, 299.

<sup>17</sup> H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, BSC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 358.

<sup>18</sup> R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 388.

<sup>19</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 734.

<sup>20</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #193.

Jesus commands Christians to use all their possessions, not just some fixed percentage of them, for kingdom priorities. If money stands in the way of a person's committing his or her life to Christ, Jesus will make the identical demands on that individual as he did on this young man. If the obstacle is something else, the demands will vary. But many who have claimed to trust in Christ are still unprepared to serve him with all of their possessions. True Christian stewardship will examine mortgages, credit, giving, insurance, investments, and a whole host of areas of life not often brought under Christ's lordship.<sup>21</sup>

In this story, "When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (v. 22). Jesus, however, is offering an invitation that does not burden us, but that frees us to enjoy the bounty of our heavenly Father with gratitude, while yielding everything we receive back to him for his purposes and glory. This young man irrationally clung to "treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal," while forfeiting "treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt. 6:19–20).

How will we respond to Jesus' call?

## Discussion Questions

1. What do you think that this young, rich man wanted to hear from Jesus when he asked Jesus about the good deed that he must do to have eternal life (v. 16)? What faulty assumptions lie behind this question? Why do you think that Jesus responds with a question rather than answering this man directly (v. 17a)? What does Jesus get at first when he asks the man to consider the One who is truly good (v. 17a)?
2. Why do you think that Jesus next appeals to the commandments in the Law (v. 17b)? What do we learn about this man's heart and motivations when he asks Jesus "which" commandments he needs to keep (v. 18)? Which commandments does Jesus cite in response to (vv. 18–19)? Which commandments does Jesus omit? Why do you think this is? In what sense has the man actually kept these commands (v. 20)? In what sense has he failed to keep them?
3. What does Jesus mean by the word "perfect" (v. 21a)? Why does Jesus give the man the test of asking him to sell what he possesses and to give it to the poor in order to have treasure in heaven by turning to follow him? Why does this man refuse to do what Jesus tells him to do? How does this commandment relate to Christians today? Do you feel yourself trying to wiggle out from under the weight of Jesus' words? Why do you think this is?
4. What does it mean to have "treasure in heaven" (v. 21b)? Why is that treasure bound up in following Jesus (v. 21c)? Do you see the weight of your sin and your need for Jesus as your Savior? Or, do you feel (like the rich young man) that you are a "pretty good person" who may only need to

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<sup>21</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 299.

do something to pad your resume a bit in order to gain entrance into heaven? How specifically is this passage challenging the way that you relate to God, to others, and to your possessions?