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Matthew 19:16 - 19:22



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this message by Steve Gregg, he delves into the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22. Jesus challenges the man's view that riches are evidence of godliness, and emphasizes the importance of being focused on eternal matters rather than temporary gain. The man's lack of willingness to give up his possessions and follow Christ ultimately leads him to walk away in sorrow. This story serves as a reminder to prioritize our commitment to God over worldly possessions.

Transcript

We're turning now to Matthew chapter 19 and beginning our study today at verse 16. Now behold, one came and said to him, Good teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? So he said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.

He said to him, Which ones? Jesus said, You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack? 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.

But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. This is a sad and familiar story in the life of Christ. This man, the rich young ruler, we might be inclined to think harshly of him because he refused to follow Jesus on the terms that Jesus laid out.

And yet, there are many things about this man that might be regarded as commendable. First of all, he was a moral individual and a conscientious religious Jew. He was an observant Jew.

He had never murdered, committed adultery, stolen. He honored his parents. He was a respectable citizen and a respectable member of the synagogue.

In fact, the reference to him as a ruler does not mean to say that he was a king in some country. This is a reference to his position in the synagogue. Each synagogue had a, as it were, a master of ceremonies or somebody who kept order in the synagogue who was called the ruler of the synagogue, and this man was such a person in the synagogue, which was like the church for the Jewish people.

As they went to church, they would find this man had been entrusted with the ordering of the service. He was a recognized religious leader in his community, and deservedly so. He was conscientious about keeping commandments.

Beyond this, he also was rich, we are told. Now, whatever you may feel about the impact of riches on spirituality, the Jews at that time tended to see riches as a mark of God's blessing. Now, frankly, the Bible does not encourage us in the New Testament to view riches this way, because Jesus and his apostles themselves were not rich, and even Jesus said later on, it's difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

But when Jesus said that, it surprised his disciples, because the Jews, and the disciples were Jews, tended to believe that since men like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were the men that God favored, and he made them rich, or Job was a man that God favored, and God made him rich, that things like this indicated that people who are rich must be experiencing the blessing of God. And therefore, riches themselves were viewed as an evidence that a person was godly. And so here's a man who is rich, and has therefore that evidence of being under God's favor.

He is a conscientious religious leader and a moral man. More than that, he is eager to submit to Jesus, at least initially. He recognizes Jesus as an authority on matters of eternal consequence.

And he's not only somewhat coolly interested in the subject, he comes running to Jesus, and he's eager. And he says, good teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? Now this man, in addition to all the other good things that we might have said about him, he had another thing commendable. He was interested in eternal life, and he was wondering what sacrificial act he might do to obtain it.

You know, Jesus indicated that it is a mark of spiritual dullness when people seek only to lay up treasures for themselves on earth, and neglect to lay up treasures for themselves in heaven. Or as he put it in John chapter 6, when they labor to obtain the food that perishes, but do not labor to provide the food that endures for eternal life. Jesus indicated that men ought to be concerned about eternity, and too often men are so caught up in temporal, short-term profit and benefit and gain that they are distracted from the things that are of eternal moment, the things that really matter for all time, and beyond time for eternity.

Now this man was not such a dull person. He wanted to know about eternal life. He

desired to have it.

He was willing to do good deeds or to make certain sacrifices if it was necessary to obtain it. The man had a good orientation in this respect toward the eternal. He was eager to know how to obtain eternal life, and he was wondering what thing he had to do, be it ever so difficult, he wanted to do it.

At least he thought. So here we have many things we could say about this man, and it's no wonder that in Mark's gospel, in the parallel passage in Mark chapter 10, it specifically says that Jesus looked on this man and loved him. The man had much about him to commend.

Unfortunately, not enough, however. Now he came to Jesus and said, What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? And he addressed Jesus as good teacher. Now this was the first area where the man needed to be corrected.

He viewed Jesus as a good teacher. Jesus responded to him and said, Why are you calling me good? He didn't say, Why are you calling me good teacher? Or, Why are you calling me teacher? Everyone knew Jesus was a teacher. But he points out that the man called him good in reference to his being a good teacher.

And he says, There is no one good except God. Now, this is an awkward statement. Many people have really misunderstood what Jesus was getting at, and I can understand why.

It's a strange comment for Jesus to make. Because on the one hand, it could be taken as if Jesus is saying, It is inappropriate for you to call me good teacher, since only God is good. If that is what Jesus is in fact saying, then it would indicate that not only is Jesus not claiming to be God, but he's also not claiming to be good.

He's essentially saying, A lot of people take this comment of Jesus and point out, See, Jesus never claimed to be God. In fact, he said, Only God is good, and why do you call me good? As if Jesus was trying to distance himself from that identification with God. However, you see, if that's what Jesus was saying, if Jesus was saying, I'm not God, then in the same statement, he was saying, I'm not good.

There's no way to get around it. Jesus was either saying, I am not good, or he was saying, I am God. Now, for Jesus to say, I am God, might be a strange thing for him to say, although we do have many ways in the scripture in which his disciples do tell us that Jesus was God in the flesh.

And even Jesus himself hints at that, and even says so in a fairly direct terms in certain places, especially those recorded in the gospel of John, like John 8, 58, or John 10, 31, or some of these areas where, or John 14, around verses 6 through 10 or so. And there are places where Jesus actually does comment in ways that indicate that, or hint that he is himself God. And this appears to be another one of those.

Because we either have to have Jesus saying, I'm God, or else he's saying, I'm not good, because he doesn't leave a third option. He says only God is good. And therefore, if I am God, then I'm good, but if I'm not God, I'm not good.

Okay? That's the only way you can go on this. So, Jesus is either saying he is God, or else he's denying that he is good. Now, let me ask you, is it conceivable that Jesus would say he was God? Well, of course it is conceivable.

It would certainly fit with many other things in scripture, both statements Jesus made elsewhere, and with statements that are made about him by the biblical writers. It might not be a very natural way for him to say it in this place, but it is not inconceivable for him to say that he is God. Now, let me ask you another question.

Is it conceivable that Jesus would be saying, I am not good? Well, of course that's inconceivable. Jesus was good. If any man ever was good, it was Jesus.

In fact, Jesus himself spoke of himself in John 10 as the good shepherd. Jesus did not deny that he was good. To deny that he was good would be essentially to say that he was bad.

And both Jesus and those who wrote about him confirmed that Jesus did not commit any sin. If anyone could be said to be good, he was good. He was holy and harmless, and separate from sinners, it says in the book of Hebrews.

Jesus certainly was good. And therefore, our first impression of Jesus' statement cannot be correct. Because the first impression we get is that he's rebuking this man for calling him good.

He said, good teacher. And Jesus said, why do you call me good? There's none good but God. The first impression is that he's rebuking this man for calling him good, but that can't be the case, because Jesus, in fact, is good.

And more than that, he is God. Therefore, his comment must have a different meaning, although it would require going beyond our first impressions to figure out what that meaning is. Now, here's what I would like to suggest to you.

And that is that Jesus was saying to the man, you've got it part right. You call me a good teacher. Now, I am a teacher, and I am good.

But I'm not merely a good teacher. You ought to know that there's none truly good except God. And if you have seen that I am a good teacher, and that I am good, then you should know that I am also more than a good teacher.

I am God. Now, if Jesus was trying to get that impression across, then his statement not only makes sense, but it also agrees with the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. And he

would be saying, listen, you recognize me as a good teacher, but that's all you're putting.

You're not putting it together, that I'm more than a good teacher. The very fact that you've seen goodness in me should tell you that I'm not merely a good man. I am God.

And while it would be strange for Jesus to disclose this point to the man, when Jesus so seldom made reference to his own deity elsewhere, it wouldn't be the only strange thing Jesus ever said or did, and we can't dictate what Jesus might be allowed to say or do. And to my mind, it's the only way we could really make sense of this statement. The idea is the man did recognize Jesus as a good teacher, and there are many who do recognize him as a good teacher, but that goodness that is seen in him goes beyond any mere human goodness.

All men sinned, but Jesus never sinned. All men would preserve their lives if they could, but Jesus laid down his life. Scarcely for a good man will a person ever die, and never for his enemies would a man die, and yet Jesus died for his enemies.

The goodness that is in Jesus goes beyond human goodness. And there are people like this rich young ruler who have recognized in Jesus a good teacher, but they have not put it together and come up with the right answer. The goodness in Jesus speaks of more than his being merely a human teacher.

It speaks of his divine nature. It speaks of the fact that he is more than human. He is the divine representation among men in human form.

And that, I believe, is what Jesus was commenting on. The first point that this man needed correction on was that he did not quite assess accurately who Jesus was. Now, that in contrast to all the good things I've said about him.

He was a very religious man, a respectable man, probably an honest man, a moral man, a man concerned about eternal life, a man more than a little concerned. One of the Gospels says he came running to Jesus with this question. The man had a live spiritual interest.

He went to the right place. He went to Jesus rather than to some other rabbi. Many good things we said about this man.

But it now becomes necessary for Jesus to help him along to take the next step that will make him a true Christian. He has done all of this, but he has not really become a disciple of Jesus yet. And one of the next things, probably the very first thing, is to realize that Jesus is more than he has understood him to be.

He's heard of Jesus' teachings and of Jesus' actions, but he has not realized who Jesus really is. So it's the first matter of business with him. You want to know how to have

eternal life? Well, you know, we know from the rest of Scripture the way we have eternal life is coming to know who Jesus is.

Isn't that right? In John 17.3, Jesus said, This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. That's what eternal life is, is knowing Jesus and God. So here's a man who wants eternal life, but he doesn't quite know who Jesus is.

So the first order of business is, let's get that straight. I'm God. You have recognized that I'm good.

Put it together. There's none good but God. Now, that's the first thing.

Recognition of who Jesus is. And by the way, many evangelicals today, if you'd ask them, how do I have eternal life? They would go as far as we have gone in the narrative so far and would go no further. They would say, well, you need to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is God or whatever.

In other words, you need to accept correct doctrine about Jesus. In our case, of course, living after the cross and the resurrection, we'd add to that, you must believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead. Jesus could have added that here if that was already historical reality, but he hadn't yet died or risen when he made this comment.

So the point is, when it comes to eternal life, the first order of business is getting your belief right about who Jesus is. An inadequate perception of Jesus, of his person and of his mission, is going to prevent you from really entering into eternal life, which is to know Jesus Christ. Now, in many of our churches, when people say, what must I do to have eternal life? We would say, as Paul did, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved.

Of course, that's not the only thing Paul said. Paul said many, many things related to eternal life in his epistles, and we can't just go by one abbreviated statement and say that says it all. But with many of us, it does.

If somebody has come to acknowledge that Jesus is God, that he's the Son of God, that he died on the cross, that he rose again, that he died for my sins, if people acknowledge these things about Jesus, we're willing to say, you have it. You have eternal life. But Jesus didn't stop there.

He started there, but there was more. There's more than just believing the right things about Jesus. There's a certain commitment.

There's a certain choice that needs to be made in addition to this. And Jesus does not leave the man right there. He said, okay, if you want to have eternal life, if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.

The man said, which ones? And Jesus listed several of the commandments of the Old Testament. He listed actually commandments mostly that came from the Ten Commandments, and especially the second tablet, which had to do with righteous behavior toward your neighbor. Honor your parents.

Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal.

Don't bear false witness. It's interesting that although he quoted from this second tablet of the law, he stopped short of quoting the last command in that particular list. And that was the command, you shall not covet.

You see, as it turns out, this man's biggest problem was that he was covetous. He coveted money. He was a person who had great money, and that was an obstacle to him spiritually.

And his sin was covetousness. Jesus did not quote that particular command, but he did in place of it stick a command that is not in the Ten Commandments. He took it from Leviticus.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Now, why did Jesus include that instead of you shall not covet? Well, because you shall love your neighbor as yourself makes it clearer what this man's sin was. Then thou shall not covet.

A person might think he's not covetous as long as he isn't coveting something that officially belongs to someone else. The command actually is you shall not covet your neighbor's cow or his house or his wife or whatever is your neighbor's. And therefore, he could say, well, I don't covet anything my neighbor owns.

However, the command you shall love your neighbor as yourself suggests that your goods should be made available to your neighbor who does not have as much as you do. And the refusal to give it is, in a sense, coveting that which God would want him to have. It is another way of violating the command of covetousness, and Jesus clarified it by instead of saying you shall not covet, which the man might easily say, oh, I don't covet what someone else owns.

He quoted from Leviticus. You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. Now, the man didn't quite catch it.

He said, oh, I've kept all these commandments from my youth. But he really hadn't because there were poor people all around him, and he lived in luxury. It was clear he didn't love his neighbor as he loved himself or else he would have done something to redress this disparity of need and so forth.

And so Jesus, we are told in Mark's gospel, Jesus looked at him and loved him. He saw the man was sincere but somewhat blind to his own sin. And the man in this case, in

verse 20, said, all these things I have kept from my youth, what do I still lack? He knew that he had kept the conditions Jesus had named so far, but there was still something missing.

And Jesus said to him, well, if you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give it to the poor. Now, that would be one way to show that you love your neighbor as you love yourself. You're rich.

You've got poor neighbors. You have more than enough. They have less than enough.

Sell what you have and give them what you have. That will certainly demonstrate that you really do love your neighbors yourself. And he says you'll have treasures in heaven if you do that.

And then come and follow me. In Mark's gospel he said, come take up your cross and follow me. Now, the man when he heard this was sorrowful and he went away unconverted because he had great possessions.

He was in bondage to them. When we come back the next time, we'll talk about the sequel to this where Jesus made comments on this man and on all who are like him, who are rich, and how hard it is for them to come into the kingdom of heaven. This man found it not only hard, seemingly impossible for him in his present state of mind.

He was moral. He cared about his soul. But there's one thing he idolized more than even God, and that was his possessions.

And when it came down to loving his neighbor in a practical way, loving his neighbor as he loved himself in a way that really pinched him financially, this step he was not willing to take. And, therefore, he did not take the step into the kingdom of heaven. Now, let me just say that some who are listening to me may feel as they read this story or hear it that this man made a big boo-boo and that he is probably burning in hell today because he refused to come to Christ on Christ's terms.

And yet they don't look at themselves and realize that the man was probably a much more zealous religionist than themselves, that he seemed to have a fair degree of love for God, concern for his soul, willingness to make great sacrifices to go to heaven. He kept a clean, scrupulous moral life, was regular in his religious practices, and yet all he lacked was he wouldn't sell what he had and give to the poor. Now, are you more righteous than he? Are you more zealous for righteousness and for eternal life than he? Do you idolize your possessions? Would you give them all if Jesus said to do so? Would you just surrender them all and go off and be a disciple living by faith day by day? If you would find this difficult as he would, then you're certainly no better than he.

And yet you need to be. You need to make the step that he would not make. You need to not only believe the right things about Jesus, which was the first step that Jesus brought

the man to, but you need to also make the steps of obedience and full consecration to him.

It may not require you literally selling your goods if he doesn't tell you to do that, but it does mean that you're willing to do whatever he says, including that. And it means that you are totally consecrated to him and he becomes your total Savior and Lord. It means that your life is from now on defined in terms of pleasing him and doing what he says, rather than any other agenda that you may ever have.

Have you made that step? If not, then don't look smugly and self-righteously upon this man as a man who made a big mistake. You're making the same mistake and you will have the same result. The man went away sorrowful and I dare say he went away unsaved because he would not take that final step of consecration to Christ.

He took many steps that direction, but he missed the final and decisive step.