

Gaining Life

Matthew 19:13-30

In my opinion, one of the greatest stories in the Bible is that of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. There are so many intriguing elements of that story, and so many different things that you can emphasize and focus upon. Remember that Paul and Silas were imprisoned, and God opened the gates of the jail to free them. Literally. When God wants to break someone out of jail he uses an earthquake!

Acts 16:25 But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed."

That's exciting. You just have to love such displays of God's power. And then the response.

Acts 16:27 "When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas."

And then comes the greatest question a man could ever ask. "What must I do to be saved?" It is the greatest question a minister of the gospel could ever hear. The greatest greatest ever to receive an answer in the Bible.

Now, in one sense, that can be something of a trick question. Because, actually, you don't "do" anything to be saved. But because of the obvious sincerity of this Philippian jailer, Paul skipped over all the theological nuances and deeper, doctrinal

explanations that would have been appropriate in other situations, and he just gave the simple answer in simple, straight-forward words.

Acts 16:30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

What must I do to be saved? Again, if you really think about it, actually, the answer is, nothing at all! I expect you all know the verse,

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Similarly,

Tit. 3:4 "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

So Paul could have answered the Philippian jailor, "You can't do anything to be saved. God saves you, not because of anything that you do. You are saved by faith, not by works." But instead, skipping over all of that very good and precise theology of God's grace in salvation, he answers the question according to its root issue. What must I do to be saved? The answer is, not some good work, or some measure of performance in good works. No, not a work that you do at all. Rather, "Believe on the Lord Jesus." Believe in Jesus! That's what you must do. That's how you receive and accept the gift. And that Philippian did just that!

Acts 16:32 “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34 Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.”

So what must you do to be saved? Believe on the Lord Jesus. Rom. 10:9 “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation... 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

Why, then, doesn't Jesus answer the question that way, as we read in our text this afternoon from Matthew 19. A rich young man asked the question. Luke's gospel tells us he was a rich young ruler. On the surface, we cannot discern whether he was sincere or not, but we can tell from his question that he was specifically looking for some particular good work that he could perform in order to earn and achieve eternal life, right standing with God. This was not the Philippian jailer, who had been humbled by the demonstration of God's power and grace, thereby seeking to be saved from his sins. No, this was a man given to a sense of his own goodness, wanting to know what act of goodness he could perform in order to earn salvation.

This rich young ruler represents a lot of people in our day and age. When they ask this great question, “What must I do?”, they really mean it. They want to know what to do, so that when they do it, it will be sufficient! They want to know, how good is good enough. And they think that they can accomplish it. They think that they can be good enough. They just need to know the

standard for a passing grade, as if you were in a very difficult math class and know that you needed to get a “C” to pass the course. So what is a “C”? Is a 70% average good enough? Does the teacher grade on a curve, so maybe a 65% would be good enough to pass? Or are the standards really high, requiring a 75% to pass? What must I do to pass this course? That's what the rich young ruler was asking Jesus.

And Jesus gives him a very hard hard answer. Actually, to extend this analogy of the math class, here is the grading scale. It is actually a pass/fail course. A passing grade is 100%. A perfect score. If you get a perfect score, you pass. And if you miss just one question, you fail!

Thankfully, no teacher in any school has that grading scale, but that is God's measure. If you want to do something to be saved, then be perfect. That's the standard. Keep the law perfectly. That's the story that is before us this afternoon. But let's step back a minute, and again look at that question. Ultimately, it is,

I. THE MAIN QUESTION OF LIFE.

Jesus is not being mean or dismissive of this rich young ruler, because the question, in and of itself, is appropriate. It is the ultimate question of life. How do I gain entrance into eternal life? And that is the question that Jesus does, in fact, answer.

A. Gaining an entrance to eternal life.

I'll make brief reference to verses 13-15, since that really is the same issue though the image is obviously very difference. How do you gain eternal life? You become like a little child! Verse 14, “of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

We looked at that whole matter a few weeks ago, from,

Mat. 18:1 “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven..”

So in one sense, you enter the kingdom of heaven by coming to God like a little child, humble, dependent, simple, trusting. You come to God looking for everything, just as a child begins life looking to his mother. But again, this rich young ruler, puts the question in terms of law-keeping. “What good deed must I do...” Jesus answers him accordingly. He answers according to the law. If you want to know what good deed of law-keeping you must do, what law you must obey to be saved, Jesus says, “all of them.”

v.17

That seems a bit strict to the rich young man, so he asked for a clarification. “Which ones?” He didn’t want to be obligated by all the laws. Let’s just pick a few of them that I can measure up to, and I will focus on that. So Jesus gave him an answer.

v.18-19

The ten commandments. But wait a minute! Is Jesus implying that law-keeping is possible as a means of salvation? Is Jesus describing the possibility of works salvation? Is Jesus teaching that sufficient obedience is possible in order to gain eternal life? I would answer not only by saying “no,” but even further, that Jesus is actually teaching the exact opposite. He is emphasizing,

B. The impossible use of the law.

In other words, he is using the commandments of the law in order to demonstrate the impossibility of gaining eternal life through the law. And the reason that it is impossible because the demands of obedience to the law are so extensive. Mere superficial obedience is not sufficient. Mere conformity to the outward demands of the law is not sufficient. And there is no sliding scale for getting a passing grade. Any measure of failure, an imperfection, brings about condemnation. So, if you want to gain life by doing something, obey the law perfectly. Completely. Absolutely. And not only in outward and external form, but every possible application and situation.

The rich young ruler thought he was OK in that regard, yet still wanted to know what he had to do to succeed before God. That’s the trouble with the law. It never leaves you satisfied. It never gives you assurance of confidence. Not even to a self-righteous man such as this rich young man.

v.20

He was smart enough to know he hadn’t gotten the final answer yet from Jesus. And, of course, he hadn’t. So Jesus makes the point clearer, that law-keeping is an impossible route to eternal life. And that’s the point of his answer, the impossibility of it.

v.21

Now, that answer did something else, something I would identify as,

C. The proper use of the law.

And that proper use is not to establish the law as the means of salvation, but rather, quite to the contrary, to make you realize that you cannot use the law that way. In other words, the proper use of the law is to make you recognize your sin. It is to make

you realize your need for Jesus, your need for the forgiveness of your sins. The proper use of the law is to drive you to Christ, because the law itself brings nothing but a curse. The law defines your sin, and the wages of sin is death. The law enslaves you, the law puts you under the bondage of the duty of perfect conformity. The law even stimulates sin in the hardness of the human heart.

The law condemns, so that under the weight of that condemnation, you might flee to Jesus as the only hope for your salvation. Isn't that the point of,

Gal. 3:21 "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. 22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

So Jesus doesn't let this rich young man off the hook at all. In fact, he sinks in the hook of the law all the more deeper. He exposes the man's love of the world. He exposes the selfish sinfulness of this man's heart. He exposes this man as a sinner! That's what the law does. That's what it is supposed to do!

v.21-22

That brings up a very appropriate question, doesn't it?

II. WHO THEN CAN BE SAVED?

And that question is the basis of the parable that Jesus then teaches to his disciples. It is their question of him in,

v.25

That question was prompted by what Jesus says in,
v.23

Difficulty, in this context, is understated. Actually, the idea is impossibility! According to the law, who can be saved? No one! Jesus is expanding upon the idea of,

A. The impossibility of works-salvation.

v.24

Take a rich man, one who loves his riches, who depends upon his worldly wealth for life and security. Here is an illustration of the probability of that rich man entering heaven. Consider a needle, a little tiny sewing needle. Now, look at the eye of that needle. It is the very, very small hole through which you thread the needle. That is very hard to do, and if you have any eye troubles at all, or any troubles with the movement of your fingers, it's almost impossible. Threading the needle is a very difficult task.

Now, think about this. Instead of taking a small thread and putting it through the eye of the needle, take a camel. Or any large animal. Take a camel, and try to put that camel through the eye of the needle.

So, are any of you thinking about the success of your efforts? Has anyone figured out a clever way to accomplish that goal? Take a camel, and thread it through the eye of the needle. Any success? Of course not, and that's the point. It's so obviously impossible, that it is ridiculous! Even humorous, in the foolishness of the whole idea. It is absolutely and completely impossible. Not just very difficult, but there is no chance of success whatsoever. No chance at all! That's what prompted the disciples' question.

v.25

And that's what gave Jesus the opportunity to teach his disciples the lesson he wanted them to learn. Yes, salvation is impossible if it is a work of man.

v.26

Peter responds then, in typical Peter-like fashion.

v.27

Actually, that's not a bad question at all. And it is not inappropriate. Peter and the other disciples had left everything.

Mat. 4:19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him."

So Jesus pronounces a blessing upon his disciples. He describes and defines their blessing.

B. The blessing of following Jesus.

And what a blessing it would be.

v.28

In the new world, in the regeneration, in the restoration of the world, obviously referring to Jesus' return in judgment and triumph at the end of the age. When Jesus comes back, when judgment is accomplished, when all things are made new not simply in the context of personal salvation but in terms of the whole world, when that day comes, Jesus' authority will be fully and completely revealed. He will be seen sitting on his throne, which is at the right hand of the father.

And the twelve, the disciples soon to be the apostles, they will be sitting on twelve thrones surrounding him. And when you sit

on a throne, that means that you exercise rule and authority! That's the blessing. Reigning and ruling with Jesus.

Notice, however, that blessing doesn't come in this age, not in the fullness of the reality of it. This is a blessing for the future, for that time of regeneration of the whole world. But let me say two things about that blessing.

First, all the saints will share in it. The twelve apostles are pictured in the lead, as representative of the whole church, but actually the whole church, all the saints, will share in that glorious blessing. Consider,

Rev. 3:20 "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. 21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

So all the saints will join with Jesus in the exercise of his judgment of the world, and that is, surely, the blessing to which he refers here in Matthew 19. The blessing of authority, the blessing of fellowship with Jesus in the exercise of his authority over the whole earth. So we read fascinating things like this,

Rom. 16:20 "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

And, Jude 14 "Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, 15 to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."

Or, 1 Thes. 3:11 “Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, 13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

So the blessing is ours, as well, in Christ. And then, let me emphasize that although it is a future blessing in the fullness of its reality, it is also a present reality! In the realm of spiritual reality, we are already seated on thrones at the right hand of Jesus.

Eph. 2:4 “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

We’re already there! Isn’t that amazing! We are already raised up and seated with Jesus in the heavenly places! That blessing is already ours, and though we do necessarily see it or feel it or even experience it in the physical realm, it is still the spiritual reality that should give you strength and hope. And so Paul prays for the Ephesians to “know” that power of God,

Eph. 1:19 “...what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His

body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

The prayer is that you and I might know the immeasurable greatness of that power. Jesus is seated in authority at the right hand of God in the heavenly places far about all rule and authority. In this age as well as in the age to come! That’s the blessing that Jesus promised his disciples, and that is the blessing in which we share as well. What a great blessing it is! Expressed ever so personally by Jesus’ words in,

v.29

There is a cost to following Jesus. You lose your own life. But there is a blessing as well. You gain a hundredfold what you have lost. You gain eternal life.

Mat. 16:24 “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

So it is impossible to save yourself, by your own works of righteousness. But to those who are saved by grace, through faith, to those who die to themselves in order to follow Jesus, the reward is great. Ultimately, it is the reward of life. And when that reward is fully granted, we will see,

C. The restoration of good order.

v.30 “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Jesus will make all things right! Those who have been first in this world, those who have exercised rule and authority in this age, those who have been exalted in their sinful arrogance and rebellion against God, will be judged.

Luke 13:28 “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets

in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. 29 They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. 30 And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last.”

And those who have been left out, in terms of the blessings of this world, will be rewarded. “[They] will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God.”

Such is the glory we enjoy here and now. And such will be the fullness of the glory we will enjoy at the end of the age. Such is the very definition of life itself, namely, fellowship and communion with God. And you who are last, in the measure of this world, perhaps you who have suffered the most, you who have lost the most, you shall be first in the kingdom of heaven. Please let that hope be your encouragement and your joy, as you long for that day of Jesus’ return to come.

So, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Answer: There is no good deed you could possibly do in order to earn eternal life. “What must I do to be saved?” Absolutely nothing. “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” So, instead, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

Rom. 10:9 “...confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, [and] you will be saved.”