

Focus Text

"And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And 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 mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

(Matthew 19:16–30, ESV)

The Rich Young Man

You may have noticed that Matthew 19 starts to dig into the practical realities of life, including marriage and humility. Now Jesus returns to a lesson he taught earlier: no one can serve two masters. A man, who we later learn is wealthy, comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. To be honest, this is one of the greatest questions anyone can ask.

First, the young man wants to know which good deeds he must do. Jesus reminds him that only one is truly good, and that is God alone. Just as we saw with the little children, this is a reminder that we do not inherit the kingdom of heaven by what we give, but by what we receive. Human beings are not good enough to earn eternal life; we must inherit it as a gift.

Even so, Jesus gives him some practical direction. God chose to reveal his character, and part of who he is, through the law he gave his people. So Jesus lists what is essentially the second half of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20: do not murder, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother. Then he adds one more: love your neighbor as yourself. This is a bit of foreshadowing, so I want you to pay close attention to that last command, because that is exactly where Jesus is headed.

The young man replies that he has kept all of these commandments, and kept them well. Notice that Jesus does not challenge him on this claim. We know from Jesus's other teaching that if you hold hatred in your heart toward someone, or call your brother a fool, you are guilty of murder. Yet this man says he has kept these commands perfectly, and Jesus accepts his faithfulness. Still, Jesus makes it clear that he has not yet reached maturity, or what Jesus calls being "perfect."

So Jesus gives him another challenge, one that will help him understand what must happen to receive eternal life. He gives him two commands. The first is to sell everything and give it to the poor. What matters here, just as in the lesson of the children, is that this man is to give up everything he has in order to inherit the treasures of heaven. He is not to sell his possessions to people who could repay him with gifts or favors, but to give his wealth away to people who can give him nothing in return.

Jesus is reminding this man that charity and almsgiving are essential. He also recognizes that the man is not ready for eternal life, because he has not let go of his earthly attachments. This man places great value on status and possessions, and he wants to hold on to everything he has.

Jesus wants him to understand two things. First, eternal life is a gift we look forward to in the life to come, and its treasures are far more valuable than anything here. Second, by telling him to give to the poor, which is almsgiving, Jesus is pointing out that this wealthy man has not truly cared for the people around him. He may have done all the good works required to love God, but he has failed at the second great command, to love his neighbor as himself, because he has not cared for them. He has far more than he could ever need, and yet there are neighbors around him who are starving.

Jesus's challenge reminds us that materialism can make us so focused on worldly things that we forget our highest calling: to love God and to value his coming kingdom. It also reminds us that loving our neighbor is a selfless act we must take seriously.

This is where the story becomes heartbreaking. This man is clearly very wealthy, and he discovers that he does not want to follow Jesus as sincerely as he once thought, because he is too attached to what he owns. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 6: you cannot serve two masters. You can serve God, or you can serve money. This man decides that his status and his possessions are not worth giving up, even to inherit eternal life. His stuff has anchored him to the earth, and it will not let him rise toward heaven.

Jesus then paints a picture everyone can see. It would be easier for a camel, the largest animal in the region, to pass through the eye of a sewing needle, the smallest opening imaginable, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom.

Then Jesus offers grace. He reminds them that people could never do this on their own, but with God all things are possible. In other words, if we truly want to let go of this world and inherit eternal life, the only way that will happen is by fully trusting God and leaning on him and his saving work. Just as with the question about divorce and the blessing of the little children, we see again that this is not about what we give; it is about what we receive. The lesson for the rich man and for the disciples is that pursuing God and his coming kingdom is their highest calling. They are to look to Christ and ask him for salvation, not lean on earthly goods to make it happen.

Once again, as with the teaching on divorce, the disciples are shocked. They grew up hearing that material wealth was a sign of God's blessing, so they ask, "Who then can be saved?" And once again Jesus reminds them that salvation comes from God, not from man.

Then the conversation shifts. Peter steps forward and points out what the disciples have actually done: they have walked away from everything to follow Jesus. And he is not wrong. The disciples left every earthly attachment behind to follow him. What they do not yet realize is that following Jesus will eventually cost most of them their very lives, but they were willing to walk with him.

Jesus then reminds Peter and the other disciples of the gift waiting for them: they will have a special place in heaven, and they will sit on thrones. This calls to mind Revelation 4, where we are introduced to the 24 elders, whom many understand as 12 representing the tribes of Israel and 12 representing the apostles. They will indeed sit on thrones, and they will cast their crowns before King Jesus in celebration and worship.

Jesus closes this teaching by reminding them that the rewards of heaven will be a hundred times greater than anything given up on earth. This is similar to what we see in the book of Job. Job was brought into poverty and loss, yet he continued to trust God through those difficult times, and in the end God restored to him far more than he had lost.

Our story ends with a sobering reminder: we live between two kingdoms, the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven. Jesus wants his people to be focused on the kingdom of heaven, so much so that if it costs them security and wealth in the kingdom of earth, they would be willing to give it up in order to inherit eternal life. In my personal opinion, that inheritance is far more valuable than any earthly possession.

Application

Give Something Away

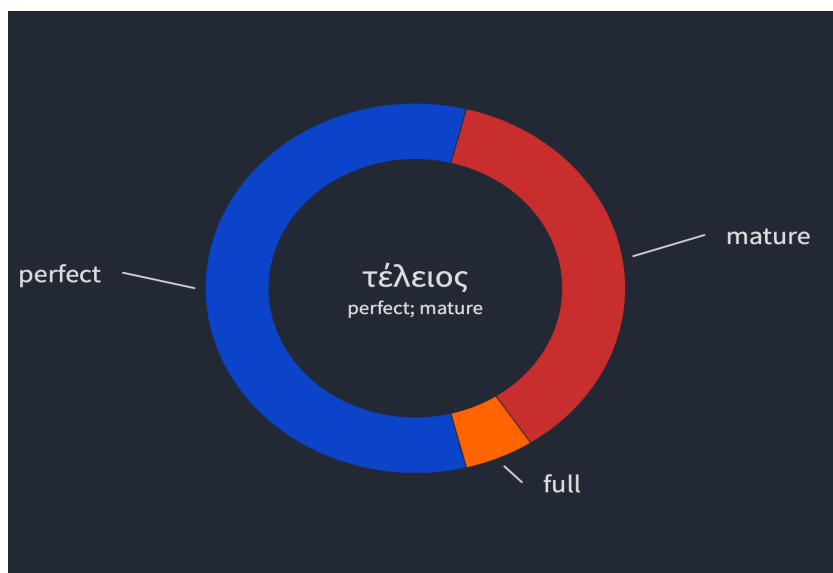
This week, give something away. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's a possession you know someone else could use. Maybe it's something valuable you've been holding on to. Jesus reminds us that nothing on this side of heaven could ever compare to the inheritance of eternal life.

We also live in one of the most materially blessed countries in the world, and we often find a great deal of security in our possessions. The practice of stewardship and tithing reminds us that we do not serve wealth; we serve Christ. One of the best ways we can show that is by practicing generosity.

This week, sit down with your whole family and ask each person in your household if there is something they would be willing to give away. Try being a blessing to someone else, and let it remind you that you have a hundredfold inheritance waiting for you. Amen.

Additional Notes

“Goodness is a quality of character, and belongs in any full sense to God alone. But God’s goodness is revealed in His commandments, and inheritance of eternal life depends upon keeping them.”¹



¹ Allen, Willoughby C. 1907. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew. International Critical Commentary. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

“He gives two commandments and promises two results for obedience to those commands. The young man must sell his possessions and give them to the poor, and then he must follow Jesus in discipleship (v. 21). Together the commands form an invitation literally to “go on the road” with Jesus’ itinerant troupe, making a clear break from his former life-style. Almsgiving and discipleship will make the man “perfect” (teleios), completely whole or mature (as in 5:48), and he will receive the promise of eternal life which he requested, described here as “treasure in heaven” (cf. 6:20). Almsgiving was a cardinal virtue in Judaism, but this extreme sacrifice was never commanded. The Babylonian Talmud (b. Ketub. 50a) forbade giving up more than 20 percent of one’s income, though exceptions did occur in practice (cf. b. Ta’an 24a). The two commands to sell all and follow Jesus must be kept together.”²

“19:25–26 The disciples respond in amazement, perhaps reflecting the Jewish tradition that equated riches with God’s blessing. If those usually viewed as most blessed by God are so unlikely to make it into the kingdom, who in the world stands a chance (v. 25)? Jesus replies that, humanly speaking, no one does. But God can and does regenerate hearts, making it possible to serve him rather than mammon, which is otherwise everyone’s “bottom line”³

“Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.” (Revelation 4:4, ESV)

² b. Ta’an Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit

Blomberg, Craig. 1992. Matthew. Vol. 22. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³ Blomberg, Craig. 1992. Matthew. Vol. 22. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.