

The Messiah and His Kingdom have Come

Radical Discipleship

Matthew 19:16-22

By Hexon J. Maldonado

Delivered on June 30, 2019

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be saved? How does a person get saved? These are important questions to ask that we need to know the answer to because we live in a culture where there are lots of people out there who claim to be Christian but are not living the life. Even though the percentage of professing Christians in the United States is getting smaller, there is still a large percentage of the population who profess to be Christians. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, just over 50% of Americans claim to be Protestant Christians.ⁱ What's interesting, however, is that according to a study published by "Church Leaders," an online magazine, in 2018 only about 17% of the U.S. population attends church on a weekly basis.ⁱⁱ Just over 50% of Americans claim to be believers, but only about 17% attend church. So, it begs the question: what does it mean to be saved? What does it mean to be a Christian? What does a person have to do to inherit eternal life? How would you answer that question? Your neighbor says to you, 'Hey, what do I have to do to go to heaven?' What do you say to him? It's important that we know how to answer that question. We might say, 'Put your faith in Christ.' 'I already have.' Or, 'Believe Jesus died on the cross for your sins.' 'I've done that too.' 'Say the sinner's prayer!' 'I've done that too, and I've been baptized. Great! Since I've done all these things, I'm just going to keep living my life the way I've always lived my life because I know I'm saved.'

Thus, what's important about the passage we're looking at this morning is that here is a young man who asked Jesus this very same question: "What must I do to have eternal life?" Don't we all wish our unbelieving friends would make evangelism this easy for us. But even if they don't, it's important that we know what to say to people when we're asking the question for them: What must you do to have eternal life?

Before we begin, let me just point out that this entire pericope (vv.16-30) appears in all three synoptic gospels with only minor differences. This is important because it tells us two things: (1) Matthew, Mark, and Luke all thought it was pretty important since they all included it in their gospels, and (2) evidently, this event made an impression on the apostles. Thus, the context is that Jesus is still sitting there in the same place (although Mark says that Jesus was just starting to head out on his journey). Either way, he just got done teaching on marriage and divorce, and he has just finished laying his hands on some children and blessing them and offering a teaching on having a childlike faith, and a "young man" (v.20) comes up to Jesus asking him a question. Luke tells us this man was a ruler of some sort, so he not only had wealth but he had authority as well.

In v.16 he says to Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" What's interesting about the fact that this man is even asking this question is here is a Jew, and from his response in v.20 obviously a devout Jew, and yet he is asking what he needs to do to have eternal life. You think he's wrestling with some doubt? Probably. And so Jesus responds in v.17, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good." Jesus' point is that if you're looking for something good, then look to God. I mean, why are you even asking? Shouldn't the answer be obvious?

Nonetheless, Jesus answers his question in the second half of v.17, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” The rich young ruler then says to him, “Which ones?” Now you need to understand, he’s not trying to be smart or difficult. Here is a man who is obviously struggling with doubt regarding his own salvation. Here is a man who has tried to keep all the laws of God from his youth, so his question is more of ‘*what am I missing?*’ ‘Which ones, Jesus? Maybe there is a specific law I’m missing that I’ve been overlooking.’ He wants to hear which laws Jesus thinks he should follow. And so Jesus says in v.18, “You shall not murder [6th commandment], You shall not commit adultery [7th commandment], You shall not steal [8th commandment], You shall not bear false witness [9th commandment],¹⁹ Honor your father and mother [5th commandment], and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself [Lev 19:18].” Jesus doesn’t give an exhaustive list, and I don’t think he is listing what he thinks are the most important commandments in the Bible. As if to say, ‘If you just keep these, you’re good.’ Because obviously the most important commandment is the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me.” Jesus wasn’t suggesting to the rich young ruler that he could ignore the first commandment. Rather, Jesus is just reminding him of some of the commandments he should be following.

Jesus is also not encouraging law-keeping as a way of entering eternal life. Remember, Jesus is responding to the man’s question about ‘what must I do to have eternal life?’ By Jesus telling the man to keep the commandments and then citing some of them, he is simply reminding the man that God has given you his revealed word, so just read it and do what it says. ‘Why are you asking me what you need to do?’ But what’s interesting is the young man’s response (v.20): “The young man said to him, ‘All these I have kept. What do I still lack?’” *All these I have kept.* Now, the man clearly is not claiming to be sinless. He is thinking about law-keeping in the same way every devout Jew thought about law-keeping. For example, in Phil 3 when Paul is describing just how much of a true Israelite he is he says of himself: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, *blameless.*” Paul was not claiming sinless perfection. Rather, he is saying that he always made sure to follow the law so that even when he sinned, he made sure to offer the proper sacrifice for his sin and do what the law required. The rich young ruler is saying the same to Jesus: ‘Look. I keep the law. And when I violate the law, I always offer the proper sacrifice for my sin. But I keep the law. *What do I still lack?*’

Now there’s an important point to be learned here from the rich young ruler: Salvation cannot come from law-keeping. Not only can salvation not come from law-keeping, but the assurance of salvation cannot come from law-keeping. Here is a man who has devoted his entire life to keeping all of God’s laws and yet he is asking Jesus, ‘what must I do to have eternal life?’ ‘What am I still lacking?’ Why is he asking Jesus this question? Three reasons, and all three reasons are found in Heb 10.

Notice: (Heb. 10:1) “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.” Law-keeping cannot make you perfect in the eyes of God. The law cannot make anyone perfect because the law of God is the external standard of God’s glory which is simply there to remind us that you are not perfect. And perfection is God’s standard. Recall in Matthew 5:48 Jesus says, “Therefore, you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” And he’ll even say it to the rich young ruler in the very next verse in Matt 19. He’ll start by saying to him: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what

you possess and give to the poor...” Perfection is God’s standard so if you want to gain eternal life by keeping the law you must keep it perfectly. But even if you tried to and did a pretty good job of keeping God’s law, like the rich young ruler and like Paul, there would always be that measure of doubt, that nagging voice in your head saying, ‘Did you miss anything? Did you commit a sin you didn’t notice? What if you haven’t been good enough? What if you’re not perfect enough? And so the first reason the rich young ruler is asking Jesus is this question is because God’s standard is perfection and law-keeping cannot make you perfect.

The second reason the rich young ruler is asking Jesus his question is because law-keeping cannot cleanse your conscience. (Heb. 10:1-2) “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, *would no longer have any consciousness of sins?*” In other words, all these sacrifices might ensure that God would not strike you dead, but they did nothing to remove your consciousness of sins. They did nothing to cleanse your conscience. They did nothing to remove the burden of your guilt. This is what the rich young ruler is dealing with. He has been keeping the law, but he still carries the burden of his guilt. The Law can’t fix that.

The third reason the rich young ruler is asking Jesus his question is because the Law, in fact, was designed to remind us of our sin and guilt. (Heb. 10:3-4) “But in these sacrifices there is a *reminder of sins every year*.⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The point of the Temple sacrificial system with all of the sacrifices being offered by the priests, with all the people coming through the Temple offering their sacrifices for the various sins they’ve committed, the Temple was a bloody mess and it was all designed to remind the people day in and day out—you are sinners and you can never live up to God’s standard of perfection! And this is what the rich young ruler is struggling with. ‘Jesus, I keep all of God’s laws, but what am I still missing? What am I missing? I don’t have assurance of my salvation. I don’t have assurance.’ My friends, a lot of people still live this way. A lot of people inside the church live this way. Trying their hardest to be a good person and to keep God’s commandments in the hope they’ve been good enough, all the while wrestling with assurance, all the while wondering if they’re really saved. Thus, the first main point of my message is that salvation does not come from law-keeping.

Now let’s go back to Matthew 19 and notice how Jesus responds to the man. (v.21-22) “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.’²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” What is interesting about Jesus’ words is that the last commandment Jesus cites is “love your neighbor as yourself”, and the guy says, “I’ve kept all these commandments.” Yet, when Jesus tells him to go and sell all his possessions and give to the poor he says, ‘Nope. Not going to do it.’ So then does he really love his neighbor as himself? Nevertheless, it’s important to note that the fatal mistake he makes is not in being unwilling to sell his possessions and give to the poor. The fatal mistake he makes is not being willing to follow Jesus. That’s really what Jesus wants him to do. Essentially, Jesus is saying to the man, “If you would be perfect, if you want to live up to God’s standard, then come and follow me.” Jesus wants the man to follow him, to commit to being one of his disciples, to commit the whole of his life to going where Jesus goes, learning what he learns, living how he lives. And if he’s going to do that then he doesn’t need to keep all his possessions because he can’t bring them with him.

In other words, salvation is about wholly committing yourself to following Christ. This is essentially the answer Jesus is giving to the man's question: What must I do to have eternal life? Answer: Be willing to give up everything and follow Christ? That's what it means to be a Christian. That's what it means to be saved. That is how a person gets to heaven—by committing the entirety of their life to following Christ, to worshipping Christ, to loving Christ, to learning about Christ, and to wanting to be like Christ. And there's no in-between. You're either 100% following Christ or you're not. And that only makes sense. Right? If someone says, 'follow me and I'll show you how to get to where you're wanting to go', how can you say, 'OK, but I'm only going to halfway follow you'? What does that even mean? How can you halfway follow someone? You're either following them or you're not. And yet there are a lot of people in the world and in the church who think they can halfway follow Christ. They think they can follow the commands they agree with and disregard the ones they don't, and God will be ok with that. They think they can have their own special relationship with God. They think they can offer God any level of commitment and God will accept it. That's the mistake Cain made. Cain was of the mindset that 'it's the thought that counts.' And God made painfully clear to him that it may be the thought that counts, but Cain did not give much thought to his offering. Let us also not forget the words Jesus says to the church in Laodicea in Rev 3:15, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!"¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." God will not accept mediocre Christianity. The difference between being saved and not being saved is the difference between being wholly committed to following Christ and something less. Paul understood this. This is why he was so radically committed to pursuing Christ. Paul didn't just have an extreme personality. He understood that mediocrity just won't cut it. Listen to the words of Paul from 1 Cor 9:24-27. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." In other words, the reason Paul is so extreme in his devotion to Christ is because when it's all said and done he doesn't want to be the one who, after preaching to others, after ministering to others, after planting all these churches, he doesn't want to be one who says on the day of judgement, "Lord, Lord, look what I've done in your name. I preached. I ministered. I planted churches." And Jesus will say to him, "Depart from me you worker of iniquity for I have never known you." My friends, it has been rightly said that when we get to heaven we will be surprised by who we see there and by who we don't see there. What do you mean deacon so-and-so isn't in heaven? What do you mean my Sunday school teacher isn't in heaven? What do you mean my youth minister isn't in heaven? What do you mean my pastor isn't in heaven? This is because salvation does not come from law-keeping. It does not come from good works. It does not come from effort. Salvation is about wholly committing yourself to following Christ—it's about radical discipleship. And that's my second point: Salvation is about wholly committing your life to following Christ, not perfectly, but wholeheartedly. Thus, to be perfect you need not follow Christ perfectly, but you must follow him wholeheartedly.

One of the best examples of this is King David. David was an adulterer, a murderer, he was prideful, and a terrible father to his children, which is why they turned out as messed up as they did. And yet in 1 Samuel 13 God describes David as a 'man after God's own heart.' How

can that be? Despite all of David's sins and flaws, David's greatest and deepest desire of his heart was to please God. Listen to the words of David from Psalm 27, "One thing have I asked of the LORD [*just one*], and that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple." David was wholeheartedly committed to following God. Despite his flaws, despite his sins, in his heart of hearts he wanted nothing more than to please God, to know God, and to glorify God. This is what it means to follow Christ. This is what it means to be saved.

ⁱ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

ⁱⁱ <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>