

Exegesis of Matthew 19:16-30 -- The Rich Young Man

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1. Context

A man described as rich by all three synoptics, as young by Matthew, and as a ruler by Luke (18:18), asks Jesus what he must do to inherit “eternal life.”¹ Mark (10:17) also states that the man “ran up to him” and “fell on his knees before him.”

It should also be noted, that what Jesus says here is to a particular individual under a particular set of circumstances. Therefore, some of Jesus’ statements are not globally applicable to everyone.

2. Analysis

v. 16 Eternal life and “entering into life” are both synonymous with the kingdom of heaven.² Jesus is addressed as “teacher,” a title of respect,³ which suggests the question is quite sincere. The question presupposes a dissatisfaction and uncertainty in regard to what other teachers have said.⁴ Carson notes that his question also reveals how far he is from the humble faith that characterises all who belong to the kingdom (vv. 13-15).⁵ In addition, he appears to believe that one great deed will earn God’s favour and gain him eternal life.⁶ Apparently, this was a common belief among Jews.⁷

v. 17 Jesus queries the man’s understanding of goodness. Only God has the absolute goodness that is required to gain eternal life (cf. Ps 106:1, 118:1, 29, 1 Chr 16:34, 2 Chr 5:13).⁸ Davies and Allison suggest that Matthew may have sought to avoid the inference from Mark’s account that God is good

¹ D A Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984).

² D A Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1995) 557.

³ *Ibid*, 556.

⁴ W D Davies & D C Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 41.

⁵ Carson, *Matthew*.

⁶ Davies & Allison, 42.

⁷ Carson, *Matthew*.

⁸ *Ibid*.

but Jesus is not.⁹ However, since Jesus is truly God it ultimately makes no difference.

This verse does not mean that eternal life is earned by keeping the commandments.¹⁰ Rather, Jesus tells the man what good things he must do because he perceives the man has little understanding of what is required in order to enter the kingdom. Jesus uses *eiSel qei#* instead of *SXW,* in order to show that the man had to make a ‘pilgrimage’ not of a ‘purchase.’¹¹

v. 18-19 Hagner believes the man’s response is a question about the *kind* of commandments he must keep.¹² However, the plural *poi#aj*¹³ suggests he was looking for specific examples -- thus the translation “which ones?”¹⁴ rather than “what sort of?”¹⁵ Jesus cites the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and fifth commandments (Ex 20), as well as the summary command¹⁶ “love your neighbour as yourself” from Lev 19:18.¹⁷ All these commands relate to interactions with neighbours, and the command to “love your neighbour as yourself” turns the man’s attention from himself to others.¹⁸ Jesus makes no mention of the commandments that relate to putting God first, possibly because He wanted to show the rich man’s inadequacy in a more subtle way.

v. 20 It is quite likely that the young man did indeed obey the commandments at least in regard to the *letter* of the Law, but his response “What do I still lack?” show his uncertainty and lack of assurance about being good enough for salvation. He consciously recognises that he is still lacking something. Although he had great wealth (v. 22), he suffered from a barren soul.¹⁹

v. 21 The perfection/completeness referred to is that of obedience.²⁰ *u#parxonta* means “possessions” not just land holdings.²¹ As Hagner points out, Jesus does not directly fault him, but rather, proceeds to point out what he does lack:²² total devotion and commitment. The commandments he was not obeying were those relating to worshipping God ie. the first and second commandment and the summary command “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”²³ As Davies and Allison comment: “Jesus demands not alms

⁹ Davies & Allison, 42.

¹⁰ Carson, *Matthew*.

¹¹ Davies & Allison, 43.

¹² Hagner, 557.

¹³ Used instead of Mark’s *tij*

¹⁴ NIV, NRSV, NASB, NKJV.

¹⁵ See Louw-Nida 92.36, BAGD 1.a.b.

¹⁶ Matt 22:37-40.

¹⁷ Matthew alone adds Lev 19:18 and Davies and Allison (46) believe it was to show how presumptuous the man was: keeping the letter of the law is one thing but loving your neighbour as yourself is another.

¹⁸ Davies & Allison, 44.

¹⁹ Carson, *Matthew*.

²⁰ Davies & Allison, 48.

²¹ Louw-Nida 57.16.

²² Hagner, 558.

²³ Matt 22:37-40.

but everything.”²⁴ However, the condition Jesus imposes on the man not only reveals his strong attachment to money but also exposes the worthlessness of his ‘formal’ compliance with the Law.²⁵ Thus, Jesus pointed out to the man in a subtle, yet clear way that his God was really his earthly riches.

Note that this verse does not teach that salvation can only be gained by selling/forsaking everything. The basic thrust of v. 21 is not “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” but “Come, follow me.”²⁶

v. 22 Carson points out the man’s question in v. 20, “What do I still lack?” refers to gaining eternal life (v. 17) and Jesus’ answer in v. 21 answers this question.²⁷ Jesus’ method of dialog highlighted to the man what he was really lacking. He would not have made His point as well if He had just said “Money is your God!” The man’s reaction proved correct Jesus’ statements “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21) and “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matt 6:24).²⁸ The man leaves because, if a choice must be made between money and Jesus, money wins.²⁹ Note also, the fact that the man grieved shows his conscience was alive³⁰ and he understood the choice he was making.

In addition, the man was told to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor (ie. his neighbours) but he did not do it. This raises the question: did he really love his neighbours as himself?

The thoughts of verses 16-22 may be arranged chiastically:³¹

- A The rich man comes
- B “If you want...”
- C “keep the commandments”
- D the commandments
- C’ “I have kept all these”
- B’ “If you want...”
- A’ The rich man goes

The focus is clearly on keeping the commandments.

v. 23 The solemn “I tell you the truth” is a marker for something important.³² God’s kingdom is hard to reach for the rich because they are far more inclined to trust the security of wealth rather than God.³³

²⁴ Davies & Allison, 46.

²⁵ Carson, *Matthew*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Hagner, 558.

²⁹ Carson, *Matthew*.

³⁰ Davies & Allison, 50.

³¹ See *Ibid*, 38 -- although they do not endorse this proposal.

³² Carson, *Matthew*.

- v. 24 A literal sewing needle was in view and the camel was the largest native beast in Palestine.³⁴ This proverb purposely refers to the absolutely impossible.³⁵ Some have suggested that the “eye of a needle” refers to a small gate in Jerusalem called the “Needle’s Eye,” which a camel could pass through but only with great difficulty. However, there are no Biblical references to such a gate, nor is there any archaeological evidence suggesting that it existed.³⁶
- v. 25 Since wealth was commonly thought of as a sign of divine favour, the disciple would have been thinking “if a rich man, who has been blessed by God can’t enter the kingdom, who can?”³⁷
- v. 26 It is impossible for Man to do anything in order to be saved. Salvation can only come from God (cf. Rev 7:10).
- v. 27 Hagner notes that ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς (“Look! we...”) is emphatic and suggests a form of ‘self-satisfaction.’³⁸ The disciples were interested in what rewards they would receive for their obedience and willingness to forsake everything.
- v. 28 Matthew uses ἀληθῶς to introduce a thought that may be relied upon.³⁹ The twelve disciples will become rulers⁴⁰ in the kingdom age to come⁴¹ and “sit on twelve thrones,” sharing judgment with the Son of Man.⁴² Carson believes they will be judging the nation of Israel, presumable for its general rejection of Jesus Messiah.⁴³ Hagner writes: “The twelve disciples representing the true Israel, will thus be vindicated before unbelieving Israel by assuming authority over them -- an authority to judge or rule over them delegated to the twelve by the Son of Man Himself.”⁴⁴
- v. 29 πᾶς ὅστις (“everyone who”) implies Jesus’ answer includes all disciples not just the twelve.⁴⁵ Carson points out that the promise is not literal since one cannot have a hundred mothers.⁴⁶ Rather, the clause “receiving one

³³ Davies & Allison, 50.

³⁴ Ibid, 52.

³⁵ Carson, *Matthew*.

³⁶ G D Fee & D Stuart, *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth* 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993) 21. They note that this interpretation appears to have originated with a Greek churchman named Theophylact.

³⁷ Davies & Allison, 53.

³⁸ Hagner, 564.

³⁹ D A Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993) 106.

⁴⁰ ie. for an extended period of time.

⁴¹ Davies & Allison, 57.

⁴² “The idea that believers will at the consummation have a part in judging is not uncommon in the NT (Luke 22:30, 1Cor 6:2).” See Carson, *Matthew*.

⁴³ Carson, *Matthew*. Cf Rev 3:21 and 20:6.

⁴⁴ Hagner, 565.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Carson, *Matthew*.

hundred times over” is an hyperbole⁴⁷ implying that devoted disciples will be rewarded beyond calculation in the eschatological kingdom.⁴⁸ The kingdom demands a person’s all but the rewards more than compensate for the sacrifices.⁴⁹

Verses 27-29 may also be arranged chiasmically, with the focus on following Christ:

A “we have left all”
B “and followed you”
B’ “those who have followed me”
A’ “all who have left”

v. 30 Carson points out this proverb is one Jesus repeats on various occasions. In this context it is immediately illustrated by a parable (20:1-16), and then repeats the proverb in reverse form (20:16). It is not entirely clear who is in view here, but given the context, it is most probably people like the rich young man and the disciples. Those who put themselves and their own interests first will be excluded from the kingdom. Those who deny themselves and devote their lives to God will enter the kingdom.

The proverb is chiasmatic in nature and signifies the divine future.⁵⁰

A the last
B will be first
B’ and the first
A’ will be last

The blessings for the disciples are still future: those who deny themselves in the present will eventually be rewarded in the future kingdom and those who live it up and please themselves now will ultimately lose everything.⁵¹

3. Paraphrase

Just then, a man approached Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good work should I do in order to gain eternal life?” “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good enough to gain eternal life. If you want eternal life, obey all the commandments.” “Which commandments?” the man asked. Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself.” “I have kept all these commandments,” the young man said. “However, I still feel as though I am missing something?” Jesus answered, “If you want to know what you are missing, go, sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.” But when the young man heard this, he became

⁴⁷ Hagner, 566.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 555. Cf Rom 8:18.

⁵⁰ Davies & Allison, 60.

⁵¹ Hagner, 566.

very sad and despondent, and went away, because he was very wealthy. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “What I am telling you is the truth and you can rely on it. It is very difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a sewing needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” After hearing this, the disciples were greatly astonished and asked, “If salvation is so difficult for the rich, who are obviously blessed by God, then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them intensely and said, “It is impossible for any man to save himself, but it is possible for God to save man.” Peter answered him, “Hey! We have left everything to follow you! What’s in it for us?” Jesus said to them, “What I am telling you is the truth and you can rely on it. When the kingdom is completely here and when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you will also sit on twelve thrones, helping to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. All those who have made great sacrifices in this life for my sake, will inherit eternal life and will be more than compensated in the life to come. Those who live it up and please themselves now will ultimately lose everything, and those who deny themselves in the present will eventually be rewarded in the future kingdom.”

4. Theological Significance

Although it is not impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom, it is very difficult. Indeed, entry is impossible for those who, like the rich young man, consider their riches more important than God.

Riches do not necessarily exclude a person from the kingdom,⁵² nor is it impossible for the rich to be saved without giving up their fortune, since both Zacchaeus and Joseph of Arimathea were devoted disciples yet were also very wealthy. However, it is very difficult. The pursuit of wealth often distracts and becomes more important than walking with God.⁵³

The word *teleioj* in v. 21, signifies genuine loyalty and total obedience. The rich young man was not willing to go that far. He was willing to observe all the formal stipulations of the Law and do good deeds, but because of his wealth, he had a divided heart.⁵⁴

5. Main Point

One cannot earn salvation or buy their way into the kingdom. Rather, each person must be willing to give up *everything* in order to totally devote themselves to God and obey Him. The rewards for doing so far outweigh the sacrifices.

6. Application

It is not good enough to merely keep the ‘letter’ of the Law. Jesus called His disciples to understand and observe the principles behind the Law as well.

⁵² Indeed, if this was true, it would exclude the Patriarchs, and David and Solomon.

⁵³ Hagner, 562.

⁵⁴ Carson, *Matthew*.

Each person must be very careful not to allow earthly possessions to become more important than our walk with God. Devotion to money will undoubtedly bring much satisfaction in this age but may cause you to be excluded from the kingdom. Having great wealth may make you honourable in the eyes of people in this age but it will make you last of all in the eyes of God.