

The Rich Young Ruler, Part 2

Luke 18:18-21

I invite you to turn back to Luke 18:18, and this is Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. The account runs from verses 18-30. Starting in verse 19, we talked about the man and his question; here's the teacher and his investigation. The teacher and his investigation. "Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.'" Of all the things that Jesus could have said, he chooses here to pick apart his use of the word "good." Our evangelical impulse here is to address the seeming contradiction between doing and inheriting, right? I mean, to us, "What must I do?" sounds like works.

It seems inconsistent with the concept of an inheritance, which is all about a gift, something that is not attained by works. So why didn't Jesus do that? We're not entirely wrong on that count, by the way, but our judgment is not entirely complete. It's not fully built-in accurate here. We should notice that Jesus says nothing to correct this man's interest in doing something; and in actual fact, nothing is inherently wrong with his desire to do something, to do good works. After all,

doesn't James tell us that "faith without works is dead"? Our faith is completed in our works. Our works give evidence of the true life of our faith. If there's no works, there's no faith.

So what is wrong in his thinking, which Jesus is about to expose, is this man's orientation to his works, this man's thinking about his works. So Jesus sets this aside for a moment, sets aside this man's emphasis on works, and he focuses, first, on his view of goodness. "Why do you call me good? Why do you call me good?" Again, Jesus is not denying that he shares in the divine essence of goodness in his divine nature, as some liberals like to believe. He has not, here, denied his deity. He's not admitting his sinfulness in any way, not at all. His deity is intact, his sinlessness is perfect.

In pursuing the answer to this man's question, along the way, he's driving at something else. This man has rather impulsively, thoughtlessly, called Jesus "good." And Jesus wants to stop here, make sure he stops, he arrests his attention, and he wants him to think carefully about it. Because the concept of divine goodness, it is absolutely critical to answering this

man's question, to settling his concern about assurance of eternal life.

The term "good," *agathos*, when referring to persons and inherent character, it means upright; it means worthy, which is then grounded in the concept of divine perfection, total completion. And God and God alone is the one who possesses that quality of absolute perfection and total completion. He is, as one puts it, the ultimate measure of goodness. God is because he's the only being in whom is total perfection. He is the only undivided being in his oneness. He is non-composite. He is not composed of parts. He's absolute and perfect simplicity: one.

Jesus said to him, verse 19, "'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.'" More literally, "No one is good except one," comma, "God." Another way to put that: "No one is good except the one God," which echoes the Shema of Israel, Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Jesus is intentional in that allusion to Deuteronomy 6:4, here. This Jewish ruler is going to hear that allusion to Deuteronomy 6:4, the Shemah of Israel, loud and clear, and he's going to be immediately snapped back to his confession of faith.

So when Jesus says, "'Why are you addressing me as good?'" , obviously, that response is startling. It arrests his attention. It helps him think about the concept of good and how he's used it. I mean, did this ruler really see the deity of Christ standing before him? He did. Did he recognize it, though? Was his spiritual perception truly that strong to penetrate deeply, to see deity robed in humanity? No. Then Jesus would say, "Let's stick with what we know about God and proceed on that basis, shall we?"

It's essentially what Jesus is doing, here. After all, in seeking eternal life, it's a life that finds its source in God and God alone. Evidence of that eternal life, this goodness that he finds in Jesus, that is also sourced in God and God alone, and for the Jews and for this rich young ruler, what has revealed the goodness of God, the life of God, if not Torah, if not the Ten Commandments?

And so Jesus takes him, verse 20, to the Law. "'You're a ruler of the synagogue, aren't you? You know the commandments, you know them. Do not commit adultery. Do not commit murder. Do

not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother.'" He's saying, "You want to know what you can do, do you, so that you can be assured that you'll inherit eternal life and enter God's kingdom? God already revealed eternal life in his word. He's already given you commandments that are good. So do those commandments, and you'll really be living."

But the young ruler doesn't really seem to be picking up what Jesus is laying down, here. So he says in verse 21, you can see it there, "'All these things I've kept from my youth.'" Matthew expands that: "'All these things I've kept. What do I still lack?" "I've got AWANA badges. A list? It's just a mile long, Jesus. I know my Bible. I've been doing my Bible. I've been serving in the church, serving in the synagogue. I am now at the highest post in the synagogue. What do I still lack?"

Now we see more clearly that when he asked Jesus in verse 18, "'What must I do?'" , he wasn't thinking about doing something quote-unquote "ordinary." He wasn't thinking about doing something as rather plain and mundane, like obedience to God's word. The ruler sought to do something more, something extraordinary, something befitting his upward move in this

world, something that his wealth could fund. The ruler is revealing a heart that is unsatisfied with the goodness and the life of God in the word of God.

Before we'd be too quick to condemn him, can we admit together that we've done the very same thing, that we've seen his revealed word as rather mundane and plain at times, that we don't see obedience to the word of God the way we ought to, the way Jesus did, as something that fills us with joy and satisfaction, that reveals God's goodness and his life? This tells us everything we need to know about the state of this man's soul. No contentment in the revealed word of God. No contentment in reading it and relishing its great treasures and meditating on its truths and memorizing it, rejoicing in the truth. So listen, if he doesn't have that, he will find no assurance of life in himself. Why? Because he has none.

So, unsatisfied with the goodness of God in the word, discontented, with no experience of the life of God in the world, the young ruler expected Jesus to assign him some greater work to do. Pretty typical of young men, isn't it? Pretty typical of young men. "Oh, man, I don't want to do that. Don't

you know who I am? Don't you know what I can accomplish? Don't you know what's contained between these two ears of mine? Amazing truth. I understand things. I mean, you know the books I've read?"

Same thing with this guy. "Jesus, what great project can you give me? What great charity can I perform? What impossible mission can you send me on, that I can either accept or not. All these have kept. What do I still lack?" Now, he's not boasting, here, as some people think. He's not boasting. He's not claiming sinless perfection, either. He's simply marking his personal adherence to the Law, which is regular in his life, ever since he reached the Jewish age of religious responsibility; that is, when he became a *bar mitzvah*, a "son of the Law," at about age 13.

So he's not boasting. He's not claiming sinless perfection, but he is clearly not thinking deep enough. He's not thinking comprehensively enough about his life, deeply enough about his sin. He's saying, "Look, I've been doing all those things already. Already, I've been doing that. Ever since *bar mitzvah*

I've been doing that. You got something more?" It's like, "Law of Moses, check. What's next? Give me a real challenge here."

By this point, as I said, Jesus has heard all he needs to hear. What he sought in his wise investigation, he has found, and we're ready to hear his answer in verse 22. But let's go back and clarify and ask the question, why did Jesus start this investigation by picking apart his use of the word "good"? Why did Jesus make the connection immediately to the goodness of God, and then check this man's experience of obeying these commandments? What is he after?

I'll give you two things. First, Jesus is checking the man for signs of spiritual regeneration. He's checking the man for signs of spiritual regeneration; and what he exposes, here, in his examination, is a lack of regeneration. This man has no life in himself. If this man had been regenerated, what would his experience of keeping the Law be like? Pure joy, right? Deep, deep contentment, spiritual satisfaction, nourishment from the life of God, which is found in the word of God.

Is that too much for you to imagine? Listen to these testimonies, then, from the psalmist in Psalm 119. Verse 16: "I will delight in your statutes. I will not forget your word." Verse 18: "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law." Verse 20: "My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times." Verse 24: "Your testimonies are my delight. They are my counselors." Not my books, not the Internet, not Google. "They, your testimonies, are my counselors." Verse 35: "Lead me in the path of your commandments." Why? "Because I delight in it." In the interest of time, Psalm 119 is a long psalm, so I'm not going to go through all of them, but that is the testimony throughout Psalm 119 of a regenerate, a believing heart, and it's all about the life and the goodness of God's law.

Christian, do you find something of this same spirit in yourself? Or do you battle to pick up the Bible? If you do battle, pray. Seek the Lord. Ask him to light that flame once again, that your heart is consumed with longing for God's testimonies at all times. I'd say that without a doubt every single counseling issue that I address in the pastoral office could be solved if people had a longing and they were consumed with longing for God's testimonies at all times. Because every

answer is there. Everything we need for life and godliness is here in the word of God. And yet, where are people spending most of their time, even Christian people? On the Internet listening to podcasts, watching stuff. Their minds are filled with distraction and filled with the opinions of men and women.

Beloved, don't let anything mediate, stand between you and your Bible. Get into it, memorize it, love it, learn it, and find its goodness and riches of life everlasting in its pages. This is not a dead word. David said the same thing, Psalm 19: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true, righteous altogether. More desired to be are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there is great reward."

The law of God in a regenerate believer: life itself. Life itself. More essential than food or drink, as Moses said,

Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh." If the rich young ruler had been regenerate, his question about assurance, of eternal life, it would have been answered in his love for God's law, because that's life: to love God's law. By loving God, giving thanks for his goodness in what has already been revealed, by obeying what God has commanded for our good in his word: That is what gives us assurance about the life of God at work in us. Our affections are changed, our attitudes are different, our volition is set toward godly and righteous things like loving and doing his word. So if we're experiencing the life of God now, we know that we will participate in the life of God then as well. You get that?

So since the ruler failed the first test, as Jesus checked for signs of spiritual regeneration, Jesus moved on to a second test to see if there are any signs of spiritual conviction. It's another use of the Law: to convict the sinner. Jesus sought to know if the Law was affecting this young man's heart and doing its penetrating, convicting work. In trying to keep the Law without a new nature, had he been frustrated in his efforts? He said he kept it ever since his youth. Does he admit to, "Hey, I I'm really frustrated. I cannot fulfill this Law"? Had he been

thwarted in obeying the law of God by his sin nature? Did he find within himself no ability whatsoever to do what the Law required?

When he considered the commandment, "Do not commit adultery," did he find within himself adulterous impulses, lusts in his heart that couldn't be tamed, subdued, mortified? When he looked at the commandment, "Do not murder," did he look down to find the root of murder, which is anger, and the welling up of angry thoughts within him toward others? Did he find resentments? Did he find bitterness? Did he find a seething and a simmering and a vengeful spirit? Did he find a lack of patience and gentleness with people? Did he find a sharp, critical spirit, signs of anger, signs of murder?

When he considered the commandment, "Do not steal," did he see the depth and the breadth of it? Did he see the connection to the Tenth Commandment against coveting? Did he notice within himself an impulse of envy and jealousy, which are the impulses of theft, stealing? Did he ever desire to steal glory for himself, to get credit for himself, to steal praise from others,

to overstate his own good works? Did he complain when he was overlooked?

When he thought about that one positive commandment Jesus cites here, "Honor your father and mother," did he think about how he's honored others, starting with his parents? Did the honor that he practiced toward his parents, did it translate into honor for his elders, for his teachers, for others? Did honor for others govern and restrain his youthful ambitions?

In Matthew's gospel, we find out Jesus added another, a summary commandment that encapsulates the entire Second Table of the Decalogue: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Listen, which one of us can say we've kept that for five seconds? In an external way, this ruler gave himself a gold seal of approval for law-keeping. It's what we all tend to do, Proverbs 21:12: "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes." Oh, but next part: "But the Lord weighs the heart." That's exactly what our Lord has just done, here, before our very eyes. He's weighed this man's heart, and he's found it wanting.

So is that it? Did Jesus finish his investigation just to expose this man's unregeneracy, just to unveil his unaffected, unremorseful, uncontrite heart and then leave him there in that pitiful condition without an answer? Well, no he didn't. Our Savior, as we know, is kind, merciful, gracious. He points to the way of salvation. But let me answer the question because I don't want to leave you hanging on this. I mean, some of you may be here today and not Christians. I don't want you to walk out to that parking lot and find yourself in jeopardy. Jesus is not willing to leave this man, or any of you, lost in his sins.

So what does he do next? Verse 22 says, and I'll just add this footnote that Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus, looking at this man at this point, "loved him." How did he love him? He loved him by telling him the truth. And he said, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have, distribute that to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me." Jesus points him, right there, to eternal life and to the assurance of eternal life.

But as we close, I want you to go back to what I said at the beginning when I asked you to imagine someone like this

asking you, "How can I know that I'll have eternal life?" And I asked you to consider how you'd answer that question. I assumed you would respond with some pattern of evangelistic teaching that helps you faithfully share the gospel with someone. I outlined that pattern with our familiar GMCRC pattern: God, man, Christ, response, and don't forget the consequence. The gospel starts and ends with the holiness of God and accountability before God. That bookends the gospel.

So do we find that pattern in what Jesus said to this rich young ruler? Does Jesus help the young man understand God in his goodness and holiness? Absolutely he does, in verses 19 to 20. Did he address G, M? Did he address man, man in his sinfulness? He did, didn't he, in verse 20, through the exposure to the Law of God. And I'll just preview coming attractions: the C, R, and the C, Christ, response, consequence, they're coming, too. So listen, beloved, don't be reluctant to memorize a faithful pattern of gospel expression, and to make use of that pattern for the purpose of evangelistic teaching. Those patterns, if they're faithful, they are useful, beneficial, instructive. They give you confidence in that conversation. So do that.

One more brief word. Any of you out there, whether you're a believer or not a believer, maybe you don't know, any of you out there get this young man? Do any of you understand this guy? Can you understand and sympathize with him, whether completely or partially, and get what this man was talking about, what he was struggling with? My friend, if that's you, I want you to know that you can find life in his name today. By God's grace, listen, you can repent. You can believe the gospel. Coming to Christ, it is, everybody can attest to it, it is like squeezing through an extremely narrow gate. That means you can't bring any of your sin with you. You can't bring any of your good works with you. You can't bring anything but your soul through the narrow gate. And at times it hurts. Following Christ, Matthew Chapter 7, it is like walking on a hard and a narrow way for sure.

But by God's grace, if you will deny yourself, if you will give up absolutely everything, if you'll take up your cross daily, if you'll follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will find eternal life in his name. And I don't mean just in the "sweet by and by"; I mean right now. Right now, you know life and you know goodness. As I said, through the word of God

and through obedience to his word, you find the richness and the fullness of life in him.

So if your heart is unsettled, if your soul is disquieted, if you find yourself ill at ease, lacking peace, your mind troubled, don't let another day go by. But find the answer to this most essential question about the current state of your soul and the future of your soul as well because you can have eternal life today. You can have full assurance of eternal life for the rest of your life until you enter into your eternal inheritance in God's kingdom. Pray with me, please.

Our Father, we want to give you thanks once again for giving us such a great Savior and a wise teacher, the Lord Jesus Christ. And his words so often, as they so often do, they penetrate deeply, and they flay us open and expose the inner recesses of our hearts. They help us to see things in ourselves that we did not see, we did not know, we could not discern. But by your Spirit and by your word, you have revealed your truth to us. And we want to thank you ahead of time even for things that we haven't fully processed and fully understand.

I pray if it be your will that you would grant saving grace to some here who do not yet know you. And I pray for sanctifying grace for those who are believers, who have maybe let slide their intentionality of loving and reading and memorizing and practicing your word. We pray that you would give all of your saints, full assurance of faith, that you would solidify and anchor their hope in heaven, that their hearts would be drawn ever and always and only to Jesus Christ. Let us see him more fully, more perfectly, more clearly in the perfect word of God; and may your Spirit be kind to reveal him to us. And as we put into practice the things that we read in the word, we pray for the life of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit to grow within us to great effect, that you may be glorified in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.