



Eternal Life

JESUS'S GIFT OF SALVATION DEMANDS
HUMILITY AND SURRENDER.

MATTHEW 19:16-30

An ideology once prevalent in America is something called the “Protestant work ethic.” In its genuine expression, a strong work ethic is a logical progression from one’s relationship with God. It is an abuse of this tradition, however, to think that work is the means of a right relationship with God rather than an expression of it. The reasoning of some people is, the harder you work, the better chance of earning God’s favor.



Do you agree or disagree that nothing is free and everything worth having must be worked for? Explain.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 19:1-30

Leaving the region of Galilee, Jesus and His followers made their way down the east bank of the Jordan River to the region of Judea (Matt. 19:1). Jesus apparently spent several weeks in this region approximately twenty to thirty miles from Jerusalem. This is the first mention in Matthew of Jesus traveling to the region of Judea. While John’s Gospel indicates Jesus traveled there frequently for various Jewish festivals, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention any other visits to Jerusalem before these final weeks leading up to His crucifixion. Matthew focused solely on the Galilean ministry of Jesus until the narrative moved toward the crucifixion.

During this time, Jesus was again confronted by the Pharisees with a question designed to trap and accuse Him (v. 3). Their question concerned a law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the legitimacy of divorce. Jesus responded by stating that God’s design from the beginning was for marriage to be a permanent relationship between a man and a woman (vv. 4-6). To this response, the Pharisees called attention to the law of Moses, where divorce was permitted for indecency (v. 7). The definition of this indecency was an ongoing debate at that time between two leading rabbis of Judaism.

Jesus replied by pointing to the ideal—no divorce. Then He pointed to the reality—sin had hardened the heart and violated God’s perfect design. Divorce was the result, which was permissible only in cases of adultery. Jesus’s reply caused the disciples to question the feasibility of marriage. In response, He pointed out that for a select few, God’s design for them was to not marry (vv. 8-10).

Next came some parents bringing their children so that Jesus might pronounce a typical Jewish blessing on them by laying hands on them in prayer. Jesus spoke of the dependence of children as an example of the childlike humility needed by all to be a part of the kingdom of God (vv. 13-15). This thought links this humility with the proper way to enter eternal life as explained in the next verses in this chapter.



Read Matthew 19:16-30 in your Bible. How would you describe what the young ruler thought would give him eternal life?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

UNWILLING (MATT. 19:16-22)

¹⁶ Just then someone came up and asked him, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” ¹⁷ “Why do you ask me about what is good?” he said to him. “There is only one who is good. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ “Which ones?” he asked him. Jesus answered: Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; ¹⁹ honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself. ²⁰ “I have kept all these,” the young man told him. “What do I still lack?” ²¹ “If you want to be perfect,” Jesus said to him, “go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

VERSES 16-17

Using the words *just then*, Matthew linked the visit of a young ruler to the blessing of the children. As Jesus was engaged with the children and their parents, this man ran up and knelt at Jesus’s feet (see Mark 10:17). From verses 20 and 22 we learn he was young and rich. Luke 18:18 states that he was a ruler of some sort, perhaps a synagogue official.

His question was, *what good must I do to have eternal life?* From every indication this inquiry was sincere. What is surprising is the fact that this wealthy young man would admit he lacked eternal life. He knew something was missing from his life. Mark 10:17 described him as running up to Jesus and kneeling before Him out of respect. He was eager to fix his emptiness. Here was a young man seeking hope for this life and for life after death.

He knew something was missing from his life.

In both Mark and Luke, the young ruler called Jesus “Good teacher.” The Gospel of Matthew omits the descriptor “good” from this word of address. This variation produces some confusion regarding Jesus’s answer to the young man. Did Jesus answer, “Why do you call me good?” Or did he answer, as here in the CSB translation, *Why do you ask me about what is good?*

Scholars are divided on the answer. Whichever is more precise, each accurately conveys the meaning of Jesus's words. He used the occasion to point the young ruler to the only one who is good, an obvious reference to God the Father. If this young man was wondering about what good he must do to obtain eternal life, then He needed to meet the benchmark of what good really is—the standard of the holiness of God. Attempting to earn eternal life through doing good will always fall short of the One who is ultimately good.

Jesus continued to challenge this man's notion: if he wanted to measure up to God's standard, he must **keep the commandments**. Jesus was not teaching salvation by works. Instead, He wanted for the young man to recognize his sinfulness. The commandments were ultimately given to show us our sinfulness.

VERSES 18-19

Jesus's answer was not what the young man expected. Perhaps with some puzzlement, he asked Jesus, **Which ones?** For this young man, his reply was, *which ones am I not keeping?* He felt secure in his adherence to the law.

Jesus responded by listing the commandments that were a part of what is called the “second table” of the commandments. These were commandments that dealt with the horizontal relationships of life—family, neighbors, and other people. These would be commandments that could be observed externally. Keeping these commandments would be very demonstrable. Jesus did not start with the “first table” of the commandments that dealt with the vertical relationship with God. Following those commandments is more internal. Obviously, based on Jesus's next statements, these were the commandments with which the young ruler struggled.

Get rid of that which stands between you and God.

VERSES 20-22

The ruler replied, ***I have kept all these. . . . What do I still lack?*** Jesus then pinpointed the problem facing the rich young ruler. He had violated the first commandment by putting his riches first in his life. His wealth was the god he worshiped. ***Go, sell your belongings.*** Get rid of that which stands between you and God. Surrendering his wealth and demonstrating that surrender by giving to the poor would signify a new priority in his life. When he

did that, He could then follow the second half of Jesus's command of following Jesus as His disciple. Only then would he have ***treasure in heaven***—that is, the eternal life he sought.

The words of Jesus cut deeply into the young man, attacking him at the very core of his being. ***He went away grieving***, being unwilling to part with his idol of wealth and ***possessions***.

Jesus's instructions to this man confronted his idolatry. These are not necessarily instructions for each of us to follow for salvation. Each of us has our own area of idolatry. We must willingly give up whatever stands in the way of our surrender to Jesus. Only then will we enter the kingdom of heaven.



What are some common views on how to receive eternal life?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. (See John 14:6; Acts 4:12.)

POSSIBLE (MATT. 19:23-26)

²³ Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were utterly astonished and asked, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

VERSES 23-24

The idea that riches could be a barrier to entering the ***kingdom of heaven*** flew in the face of the beliefs of the Jews in Jesus's day. They looked on the rich as closer to God because of His obvious blessing on them. To say, as Jesus did, that the poor are closer to the kingdom than the wealthy was most surprising. That startlement will be seen in the disciple's reaction in verse 25.

Jesus reinforced His statement with a hyperbole, speaking of a **camel** passing through the **eye of a needle**. The *camel*, of course, was the largest animal seen by the Jewish people in that day. The *eye of a needle* would reflect perhaps the smallest opening present in that day. The picture of the camel trying to fit through the tiny opening of a needle would have produced laughter among Jesus's hearers. Impossible, they thought. That would be the precise reaction Jesus desired. It would also be impossible for someone who substituted wealth for a relationship with God **to enter the kingdom of God**.

VERSES 25-26

The disciples **were utterly astonished** because Jesus's statement here was in direct contradiction to the traditions of Judaism that intimated that a person's wealth gave evidence of God's favor. Wealthy Jews often thought they could purchase a more favored position with God through their gifts to the temple or through the giving of alms to the poor. Jesus, however, taught something very different.

Based on Jesus's statement that the rich would not enter the kingdom of heaven, it would appear that no one could be saved. If the rich who were blessed with God's favor could scarcely be saved, what hope was there for the rest of humanity?

In His answer to the question from the disciples, Jesus implied that the disciples were right: there is no way for anyone to be saved on their own effort. **With man this is impossible**. Wealth or poverty didn't matter. Only God can bring salvation to a person, for with Him **all things are possible**. Salvation and entrance into the kingdom of God is dependent on God and God alone.



Why was Jesus so hard on rich people?

REWARD (MATT. 19:27-30)

²⁷ **Then Peter responded to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?”** ²⁸ **Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, in the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes**

of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

VERSE 27

Still shaken by Jesus’s words concerning those who rely on their riches, Peter asked for clarification. Jesus had told the rich young man that he would have treasures in heaven if he abandoned his earthly riches. Speaking on behalf of the other disciples, Peter wanted to know if that promise applied to them. They had ***left everything*** to follow Jesus. ***So what reward will there be for us?*** The testimony of Matthew 4:20,22, and 9:9 was that these disciples had indeed left everything to follow Jesus. So the question was, “What’s in it for us?”

VERSES 28-30

While Peter’s words may seem crass and greedy, Jesus did not chastise him. Instead, He called for His disciples to pay attention: ***Truly I tell you.*** Jesus spoke concerning the coming age of glory, which He called ***the renewal of all things***. The Greek word is the word for “regeneration” and speaks of the new heaven and the new earth (see Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1). This will be the day when God makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). It will also be a day when Jesus will sit ***on his glorious throne***. This is a picture of the power and honor that will be conveyed on Jesus as King of kings and Judge of all the earth.

To the disciples, Jesus gave the promise that they would also ***sit on twelve thrones*** and judge over the ***twelve tribes of Israel***. Jesus made the same promise in Luke 22:30b, and you will “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The reference to the twelve tribes of Israel might refer to the actual tribes of Israel or could be a reference to all of God’s redeemed people. Jesus answered Peter’s question by pointing to His promise that they will be honored and rewarded because they left everything to follow Him. This was in spite of coming persecution and the possibility of death.

Jesus next included all those who make Him their priority. They, too, will be rewarded. ***Everyone who*** forsakes everything and everyone ***because of my name*** will be rewarded ***a hundred times more***. The reward of *a hundred times more* speaks of a reward that

is out of proportion to what is sacrificed. It will be much more than is expected. This reward may be referring to rewards in the coming age or the present age. It also might be pointing to rewards both now and in eternity.

Some interpreters link the words of verse 30, *but many who are first will be last, and the last first*, to the parable in Matthew 20:1-16. That parable closes with very similar words: “So the last will be first, and the first last” (v. 16). The parable of the vineyard workers in chapter 20 continues the theme of rewards. Those who give up houses and lands, relationships and riches, for His sake will receive more than they give up. On the other hand, people like the rich young ruler may be regarded as first in this life, but in the judgment to come will find they are last and left out of God’s heavenly reward.



What have you left behind to follow Jesus? Is there anything that hinders you from following Jesus?



BIBLE SKILL: *Dig deeper into a doctrine or biblical teaching.*

Compare Jesus’s teachings in Matthew 19:16-22 to Matthew 6:19-24. Identify Jesus’s statements in chapter 6 that are represented in the life of the would-be disciple in chapter 19. Reflect on the following: How might possessions become detrimental to a believers’ commitment to follow Jesus? What are some things that God might be calling you to surrender in order to follow Him?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can affirm that eternal life cannot be achieved by human achievement.
- + We can be encouraged knowing salvation is received as a gift from God.
- + We can know that following Jesus is worth it, no matter what it costs—the greatest reward being eternal life.

 **Discuss as a group the concept that everything worth having must be worked for. Allow participants to discuss how this impacts our approach to Christianity. How might your group help others to correct their understanding of salvation by grace and not by works?**

 **Write a brief paragraph outlining the things you have given up to follow Jesus. How do you think Jesus would evaluate that paragraph?**

 **Memorize Matthew 19:26.**

Prayer Needs



Explore the Bible Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter’s Bible passages.