



Eternal Life

JESUS'S GIFT OF SALVATION DEMANDS HUMILITY AND SURRENDER.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 19:16-30 Memory Verse: Matthew 19:26

When people brought some children to Jesus for a blessing, His disciples tried to stop them. But Jesus rebuked His followers, telling them to let the children come to Him because they represented what kingdom life should look like (Matt. 19:14). Right after that, a young and wealthy Jewish leader gave Jesus the perfect object lesson. He came seeking eternal life (v. 16), but he walked away grieving once Jesus exposed his true self-centered values. Jesus told His disciples that entering the kingdom requires humble, childlike faith (vv. 23-24), not wealth or influence. He added that all those who surrender the things they hold dear to follow Him would be rewarded in eternity (vv. 27-29).

As you dig into this session's verses, think about what "eternal life" means to you. How does the life Jesus has granted you affect the way you live each day? Ask God to show you ways to remind adults that salvation is impossible to obtain by human merit and comes totally by God's grace. Use the truths of this lesson to provide a biblical perspective on wealth and possessions, including how materialistic values can stand in the way of people becoming followers of Jesus.



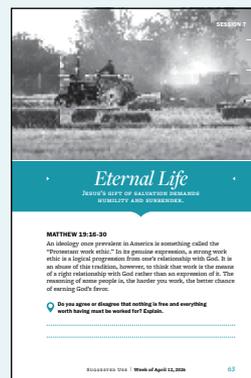
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An ideology once prevalent in America is something called the “Protestant work ethic.” In its genuine expression, a strong work ethic is a logical progression from one’s relationship with God. It is an abuse of this tradition, however, to think that 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. (PSG, p. 63)

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)

After skipping ahead to Matthew 28 for Easter, we return to Matthew 18, where Jesus concluded His long and extensive Galilean ministry. It was almost time for the annual Feast of Tabernacles in the fall, approximately six months before Jesus’s crucifixion in Jerusalem.

According to Matthew 19:1, Jesus “departed from Galilee and went to the region of Judea across the Jordan.” What Matthew doesn’t record is the three-month period of Jesus’s Judean ministry between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication in the winter (John 10:22). Only John’s Gospel (John 7:11–10:39) and Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10:1–13:21) record these events in Judea. John recorded that Jesus’s ministry in Judea ended with the Feast of Dedication when He was asked to state plainly if He was the Messiah or not. Because Jesus called God “my Father” and claimed to be one with the Father, the Jews who heard Him tried to stone Him or arrest Him. But Jesus “escaped” and “departed again across the Jordan” (John 10:22–40).

This escape put Jesus in the area of Perea on the east side of the Jordan, an area controlled by Herod Antipas (Luke 13:31–32). Luke recorded several instances of Jesus’s teaching, sharing parables, and healing in Perea (13:22–18:14), and John added the account of Jesus raising Lazarus.

After Caiaphas (the high priest) and other religious leaders heard about Jesus raising Lazarus, they were fearful that “everyone will

believe in him,” so they began their plans to kill Him. Meanwhile, Jesus headed north to a small town called Ephraim (John 11:45–54), after which He traveled through Samaria and back up to Galilee (Luke 17:11).

As Passover neared, crowds traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem for the holy day and the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread that followed it. To make this journey from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south, Jews crossed over the Jordan River to the east into the territory of Perea and moved south to avoid Samaria. Luke picked up the southern journey in Perea, sharing that Jesus visited several small towns on His way toward Jerusalem (Luke 13:22). Luke also recorded much of this early travel in Perea in Luke 13:23–18:14.

At this point, the narratives recounted in Matthew 19:1–12 and Mark 10:1–12 coalesce. All three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 19:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15) begin to match toward the end of Jesus’s Perea ministry. This takes readers to the opening of this session, a story about the path to eternal life found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Read Matthew 19:16–30 in your Bible. How would you describe what the young ruler thought would give him eternal life? (PSG, p. 64)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28*). Make copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Greatness in the Kingdom*).

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 63 of the PSG. Engage adults to share some of the things they learned about work as they were growing up.

ASK: **Do you agree or disagree that nothing is free and everything worth having must be worked for? Explain.** (PSG, p. 63)

INFORM: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Greatness in the Kingdom*) to each person in the group. Encourage adults to scan the article silently and to note insights about how ancient Israelites defined greatness.

CONTEXT: Share that after another heated confrontation with religious leaders, Jesus took time to bless a group of children. Draw attention to the following from Understand the Context to explain why Jesus allowed the children to come to Him:

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. . . . This thought links this humility with the proper way to enter eternal life as explained in the next verses in this chapter. (PSG, p. 64)

ASK: **How is childlike humility different from our cultural understanding of a strong work ethic?**

TRANSITION: *Matthew connected being like a child (Matt. 19:13-15) to our focal passage about the young man looking for eternal life. As we study this walking object lesson, consider what eternal life means to you and how you can demonstrate your relationship with God in practical ways each day.*



Group Activity Option

Music

Play a recording of "The Lord is My Salvation" by Keith and Kristyn Getty. If possible, provide lyric sheets and invite adults to sing along. Challenge adults to consider their own salvation experience as they sing the song in worship. Encourage them to use this session as a chance to evaluate their walk with God and to remove anything that looks like works-based faith in their lives.

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.

(v. 16) Matthew opened this narrative with the phrase *just then*. The *someone* who approached Jesus is identified in verse 20 as a “young man” (possibly in his 20s to 40s). Luke 18:18 also labeled him a “ruler,” perhaps in a synagogue like Jairus (Mark 5:22). Each of the Synoptic Gospels state that the man was wealthy (Matt. 19:22; Mark 10:22; Luke 18:23). Combining all these descriptions explains why this account is often referred to as that of “The Rich Young Ruler.”

The man addressed Jesus as *Teacher*, a form of respect. Mark noted that he also knelt before Jesus (Mark 10:17). The man’s first question concerned *eternal life*. The way the man formulated his question, *What good must I do?*, reveals that he believed salvation could be earned by merit.

(v. 17) Jesus’s first response to the young man’s question was a question of His own: *Why do you ask me about what is good?* Jesus then continued, *there is only one who is good*. Jesus was not denying His own deity by this statement. Instead, He was reminding the man that God already had defined what was good. Thus the man should not have needed to ask what he needed to do. The answer was to obey God’s revelation.

Likewise, when Jesus told the man to *keep the commandments*, He was not affirming salvation by works. As the dialogue moves forward, it will become clear that Jesus verified that the young man had not kept God’s commandments in spite of his claims to the contrary.

(vv. 18-20) When the man asked his second question (*Which ones?*), he should have known the correct answer would have been “all of them.” However, since the rabbis counted 613 commandments in the Pentateuch, his question perhaps

was reasonable. Jesus answered by listing the sixth through the ninth commandments, along with the fifth commandment. Each one highlights ethical duties and human relationships (Ex. 20:12-16; Deut. 5:16-20). Jesus placed the commandment to honor one’s parents out of order, giving it special attention and emphasis. To these commands Jesus appended Leviticus 19:18.

The man claimed to have *kept all these* commandments since childhood. The word *all* comes first in his statement, giving it emphasis and including all of the law’s expectations. But he realized he needed something more in his life, so he asked a third question: *What do I still lack?*

Key Doctrine

Salvation

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

(vv. 21-22) *Perfect* refers to a complete commitment to God’s will. This is what the man believed he wanted, so Jesus put His finger on his fatal flaw. The man needed to *sell your belongings and give to the poor*. The young man’s response showed that he had fallen short of the first commandment on other gods and the tenth commandment on covetousness. He also failed to love his neighbor as himself.

Jesus was not giving the man a task to earn salvation, but He did confront a major hindrance to eternal life. In the end, the man loved his *many possessions* more than obtaining eternal life. Unlike disciples like Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew who had left everything to follow Jesus, this man walked away *grieving*.



APPLICATION POINT: We can affirm that eternal life cannot be achieved by human achievement.

EXPLAIN:

Direct adults to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Matthew 14–28). Point out that the events in today’s session took place as Jesus’s ministry turned back toward Jerusalem.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 19:16-22 aloud as the group considers the man’s motivation for coming to Jesus. Use information from Matthew 19:16 in the Leader Guide (p. 80) to describe the man’s background.

ASK:

What was the significance of this man’s question?

ENLIGHTEN:

Read the following content to explain the “why” behind the man’s questions about 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. . . . He was eager to fix his emptiness. Here was a young man seeking hope for this life and for life after death. (PSG, p. 65)

ASK:

What are some common views on how to receive eternal life? (PSG, p. 67)

SHARE:

This man thought he had it all together. He claimed to keep all the commands, including those focused on our “horizontal” relationships with others. But Jesus cut through the man’s delusions. He revealed some gaps in the man’s understanding of what it means to keep the law. More important, He pinpointed the man’s biggest failure: allowing his stuff to become his god. None of us can fill God’s spot in our lives with material possessions. We can’t earn salvation, and we can’t earn a meaningful relationship with Him.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Umbrella

Bring an umbrella to the session. Lead a brief discussion about how an umbrella can protect us from either the heat of the sun or rain and other precipitation. Explain: *While it’s not a perfect comparison, God also protects us. He covers us with the umbrella of His grace. But many choose to step outside that protection and face storms and heat alone.* Encourage the group to embrace the protection Jesus provides.

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.”

(vv. 23-24) The encounter with the wealthy young man provided a teachable moment for Jesus’s disciples. **Truly I tell you** emphasizes that Jesus was about to share something important, something that needed to be listened to carefully (see Matt. 5:18).

Jesus said it is **hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven**, but it’s not impossible. *Enter the kingdom of heaven* is another way of referring to salvation (5:20; 7:21; 18:3). The words **again I tell you** show that Jesus’s saying in verse 24 is a basic repetition of verse 23.

In verse 24, Jesus used hyperbole to illustrate a ridiculous situation—a **camel**, the largest of the animals in the Middle East, trying **to go through the eye of a needle**, the smallest opening in a commonly used item. People sometimes suggest that Jesus was referring to a very low, narrow gate that a camel would have to get on its knees to crawl through. This is an attempt to make an impossible situation seem difficult, but doable. However, no such gate existed and trying to interpret Jesus’s words in this way actually reverses His point. Jesus wanted to emphasize the utter uselessness of trying to squeeze a camel through a needle.

Personal wealth, or any other merit an individual might be tempted to trust, will never get anyone into heaven. But what is impossible for humans to do on their own can be accomplished through God’s power (as verse 26 will make clear). The phrase **kingdom of God** is rare in Matthew’s Gospel. He uses it only three times: here, in 12:28, and in 21:31,43. But it is the equivalent to his preferred term “kingdom of heaven” in the previous verse.

(v. 25) **The disciples** clearly understood Jesus’s meaning and were **utterly astonished** by it. Elsewhere in his Gospel, Matthew noted that crowds were astonished at Jesus’s teaching (7:28; 13:54; 22:33). The imperfect tense of the verbs in those passages indicates that the people were left in a

continuing state of astonishment. To this sense of amazement Matthew added the word *utterly*, which also can be translated “exceedingly.”

Their shock at Jesus’s pronouncement is understandable within historical context. In the theology of that day, wealth and prosperity were taken as signs of God’s blessing for a pious life. Ancient Jewish scholars would point to passages like Deuteronomy 7:12-13; 28:1-14; Proverbs 10:22; 22:4; and the example of Job (Job 1:1-3) to validate their arguments. So, it ran counter to all conventional wisdom for Jesus to say that rich people would struggle to enter the kingdom.

In light of this new idea, the disciples wanted to know **then who can be saved?** As they understood Jesus’s statement the answer would have been “No one.” The disciples’ word *saved* is the fifth term used to refer to salvation in this narrative. The rich ruler used “eternal life” (v. 16), to which Jesus responded with the shorter form “life” (v. 17). Jesus then used the phrases “to be perfect” (v. 21), “kingdom of heaven” (v. 23) and “kingdom of God” (v. 24). The Greek word for *can* in the disciples’ question (*dynatai*) literally means “power.” So, it can be rendered, “Who has the power to be saved?”

(v. 26) Matthew said that **Jesus looked at them**, which means that He fixed His gaze on them as He declared two things. First, He emphasized the total impossibility of humans to save themselves (**with man this is impossible**). Second, He stated that God is not limited by humanity’s limitations (**with God all things are possible**).

The word **but** marks the contrast between what people cannot do and what God can do. This declaration was not new, and the disciples should have known it from God’s interaction with Abraham (Gen. 18:14), Job’s reply to the Lord (Job 42:1-2), or Jeremiah’s confession of God’s power (Jer. 32:17).



APPLICATION POINT: We can be encouraged knowing salvation is received as a gift from God.

INTRODUCE:

Remind the group that a crowd (Matt. 19:2) and the disciples (19:13) were with Jesus during the encounter with the young man. Explain that, in the next verses, we see that even Jesus’s closest followers were flabbergasted by the scene.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 19:23-26 aloud as adults listen carefully for the reaction of the disciples.

ASK:

Why were the disciples “utterly astonished” (v. 25)?

EXPLAIN:

Note that Jesus reinforced His statement with a hyperbole of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Point out that the picture of a large camel trying to fit through such a tiny opening would have seemed impossible. Share that, in essence, Jesus was saying squeezing a camel through a needle and a rich man getting into the kingdom both required acts of God.

RECAP:

Explain why the disciples were shocked by Jesus’s words:

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. . . . 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. (PSG, p. 68)

ASK:

Why was Jesus so hard on rich people? (PSG, p. 68)

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

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?**

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.”

(v. 27) As usual, Peter spoke up for the disciples (Matt. 14:28; 15:15; 16:16,22; 17:4; 18:21). Having heard Jesus tell the man to sell his possessions, Peter pointed out that the apostles had done just that: ***We have left everything and followed you.*** In Greek, *we* is placed first for emphasis. Peter’s follow-up—***what will there be for us?***—may seem presumptuous, but it was a natural question arising out of his (and the other disciples’) confusion or uncertainty.



The Synoptic Gospels

Learn more about how the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer a unified, yet distinct, portrait of Jesus’s life and ministry.

(v. 28) Again Jesus began His announcement with ***truly I tell you***, as in verse 23, to stress its importance. The phrase ***renewal of all things*** refers to the cosmic renewal of the whole creation (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; Rev. 21:1). At that time, ***the Son of Man***, Jesus’s favorite title for Himself, will sit ***on his glorious throne***. Drawn from Daniel 7 and Psalm 110, this image does not merely describe the throne itself, but also the glory of the reigning Christ. Additionally, Jesus promised that His apostles ***will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.***

The word *judging* can mean “having authority over” and has led to various interpretations. Some think it means each apostle will judge a particular tribe of Israel. Others believe the apostles will judge the tribes collectively.

Those who believe God has a separate plan for Israel and the church understand this promise to mean that the apostles will have ruling authority over those redeemed from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Those who believe that the

promises to Israel are spiritually fulfilled in the church understand this to mean that believers will be involved in the judgment (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

(v. 29) Jesus’s shift to ***everyone who*** widened His reference from the apostles to all believers who follow Jesus across the ages. While these other believers won’t sit on thrones judging, they will be rewarded for their sacrifices. Jesus said that those whose loyalty to Him led them to leave ***houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields . . . will receive a hundred times more.*** Jesus named seven items. Two of those items referred to possessions—*houses* and *fields*—and are plural, indicating that a person might own at least one or both.

The other items referred to the closest of three generations of family relations—*brothers* and *sisters*, along with *father*, *mother*, and *children*. Elsewhere, Jesus used *hundred times more* to refer to a disproportionate, miraculous increase (Matt. 13:8,23). The point is that the reward far exceeds whatever was sacrificed.

And in addition to that great reward, Jesus’s followers also carry the assurance that they ***will inherit eternal life.*** This brings the conversation back to the young ruler’s original question (19:16), which led to this teaching opportunity. *Eternal life* means a life with no end, but it also involves more than that. It refers to the quality of one’s life, a quality that is fit for eternity and still has an impact on our lives here on earth.

(v. 30) God’s kingdom turns this world’s values upside down. ***Many who are first*** now ***will be last*** in God’s kingdom. At the same time, many who might be considered last in this present age, will be first in the eternal kingdom. The kingdom is all about faithfulness. Anyone who entrusts their future to Christ now will realize the reward of life with Him in eternity.



APPLICATION POINT: We can know that following Jesus is worth it, no matter what it costs—the greatest reward being eternal life.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 19:27-30 aloud** as the rest of the group considers the tone of Peter’s words and Jesus’s response.

ASK: **How would you characterize Peter’s tone with Jesus? Why?**

SHARE: Acknowledge that Peter’s statement and question sounds greedy or self-serving. Remind adults that he probably was trying to process what Jesus was saying. Note that he may have been confused and wondered how the sacrifices he and the other disciples had made fit into Jesus’s bigger plan.

ASK: **What have you left behind to follow Jesus? Is there anything that hinders you from following Jesus?** (PSG, p. 70)

RECAP: Note that Jesus did not chastise Peter, but pointed him beyond worldly rewards toward eternity. Summarize this information from pages 69-70 of the PSG to highlight what Jesus promised:

“To the disciples, Jesus gave the promise that they would also sit on twelve thrones and judge over 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 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. . . . 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.”

EXAMINE: Guide adults through the Plan of Salvation on the inside front cover of the PSG. Explain that the young man walked away from Jesus because he wasn’t willing to accept Him as Lord and Savior. Urge adults to consider where they stand with Jesus and let them know that you will be available to speak with anyone who has questions about a relationship with Jesus.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 71 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- 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.

ASK:

How are you trying to “do good” as a way to please the Lord? How has today’s study pointed you toward a different standard for your relationship with God?

CHALLENGE:

Challenge adults to reconsider their work ethic in terms of faith.

DISCUSS:

Direct adults to read the first set of questions on page 71 of the PSG. Remind adults that, while hard work is noble and good in many areas of life, it’s not a way to connect with God. Challenge the group to consider how to receive salvation and God’s daily blessings as His gift of grace, not as a payment for hard work.

PRAY:

Close by giving adults an opportunity to pray, assigning one person to open and another to close. Encourage adults to consider their own tendency to “work” for their salvation and blessings, as well as how they might better yield to God, accepting His free gift of grace.

AFTER THE SESSION

This week, spend time praying for each adult, especially those who may need to speak with you about the Plan of Salvation. Text or call each person, thanking them for being in the group and offering to pray for them. Send a text or email to the larger group, encouraging them to read and reflect on the second set of questions on page 71 of the PSG. Remind them that anything they give up to follow Jesus is not really lost.

LEADER EXTRAS



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