

¹⁷As Jesus was setting out on a journey, one man ran up to him and knelt in front of him. He asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God. ¹⁹You know the commandments. ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’ ”

²⁰The man replied, “Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child.”

²¹Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²²When he heard this, he looked sad and went away grieving, because he had great wealth. ²³Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!”

²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus told them again, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in their riches to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶They were even more astonished and said to one another, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For people, it is impossible, but not for God, because all things are possible for God.”

As Jesus sets out for a journey, a man approaches him. He runs to Jesus and falls on his knees. The way he approaches shows that he recognizes there is something special about this Jesus. So, the man humbles himself. But he asks Jesus an interesting question: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s interesting. We don’t really think of “do” and “inherit” as being in the same family of words. We think of inheritance as a gift. But when we do something, we expect a reward. Think about your own experience. Those of you who have received an inheritance, what did you do to earn it? Nothing. It was given freely and generously. But this man’s question is strange because he thinks of inheritance in terms of something he works to earn.

Jesus asks him why the man calls Jesus good. Jesus is not claiming he is not good. But he’s saying that he is only good if he is truly God. And this man doesn’t see Jesus as God, just a good teacher. Our Lord is trying to make a point he will prove later, in the second half of the Gospel.

But what Jesus says next answers the man’s question. The man wants to know what he has to do to gain eternal life. And Jesus says, “You know the commandments. ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’” Jesus simply lays out what God had told his people all the way back to the time of Moses. If you want to earn eternal life, you must keep the commandments. Here Jesus specifically points to the commandments that focus on loving other people.

The man replies to Jesus confidently, “Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child.” Understand, this man is not being flippant. He is respectful of Jesus. He knows God’s laws. And you can tell from the way the people around him act that he is an upstanding man. Add to that, Luke’s version of this account makes it known that this man is young, rich, and successful. He has worked hard, used his wisdom to find success in life, and earned the admiration of those around him in doing all of this.

Now, I’d imagine there’s a pause before the man gave Jesus his answer, a moment to think carefully if he had carried out all these commandments. Had he murdered? Well, no. But that one was easy. Had he committed adultery? No. Whether he was married or not, he had not hopped in bed with anyone he wasn’t supposed to.

Had he stolen? Absolutely not. He had worked hard and earned every penny he owned. He had not given false testimony or defrauded people. That's why he's so admired. Even with his parents, he had treated them with love and obedience.

As he speaks these words to Jesus, I'm sure there are people nodding along. I'm sure there are people whispering, "I know him. He's the most religious, hardworking, and selfless person I've ever met." He's the kind of guy the old ladies at church try and set their granddaughters up with. You can even hear the claims: "If anyone did enough to earn heaven, this is the man." That's why Jesus says, "You're right. You are the perfect neighbor, the perfect friend, and the perfect son. Heaven is yours. In fact, why wait? Come, receive this earned inheritance right now."

But of course, that's not what Jesus says. Instead, he looks at this young man with love and says, "One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Jesus looks at this guy with love because he knows he's being genuine with his question and answer. But, as Jesus makes clear, genuineness is not the way to heaven. Jesus adds one last requirement to his list. If he truly loves God with his whole heart, he will sell his possessions and follow Jesus.

Can you see the confident smile on the man's face turn to a disappointed frown? He thought he had done enough. He expects Jesus to give him the congratulatory spiel and tell him he was on the fast track to paradise. But Jesus does the opposite. Jesus tells the man who has lived an outwardly good life that his life does not meet God's requirements, that his application for salvation based on his works has been denied.

Who wouldn't walk away sad? Who wouldn't feel like they've devoted their lives to a pursuit that turned out to be nothing? How easy it would be to read this section and make Jesus the bad guy. How could he not give this guy credit for all the good he had done? I mean, the world is full of people doing terrible stuff. Shouldn't Jesus be highlighting the fact that this is the way God wants people to live? And if Jesus is calling on this man to be perfect, why does he dangle out in front of the young man that he just needed to do one more thing? In some flawed way, our hearts go out to the man who was trying hard and they turn on Jesus. But I think that's because we relate to the rich young ruler.

We want kudos for the lives we live. We want people to praise us for the exceptional work we do while on the clock. We want people to applaud us for how devoted and tight knit our families are. We want people to stand outside of our funerals and share just how wonderful and just how faithful we were in everything we did. We like attention and we like glory. We want every good thing we do to be noticed. But there's just one more thing you have to do, dear do-gooder. That thing that you love most in life – that thing you've worked hard for, whether it is your money, your stuff, or even people – all you have to do is get rid of it. If you really love God, if you are really the devoted follower that you think you are, stop serving yourself in any way and start serving God. Take every penny in your bank account and give it to the local food bank. Finish paying off your mortgage then hand the deed over to a family that's crammed into a government housing apartment. If you want to earn eternal life, this is all that you have to do.

But you won't. You won't because you are not as faithful to God as you think you are. Sure, plenty of people might think you're the most selfless person in the world, that you would do anything for anyone. But those people are wrong. So, walk away sullen and sad that Jesus doesn't give you a sticker and a pat on the head. Or stay close and listen to the rest of what Jesus has to say.

The disciples must have been shocked. This young ruler was as good as it comes. How could Jesus just rip out his heart and wreck his pride like that? And if he had done that to this great man, what would he do to them? Jesus says to them, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" They're

silent. In their shock he speaks again: “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in their riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” What is their response? “Who then can be saved?” If not the rich young ruler, then who? Could God really set a standard that would be that impossible to meet?

The disciples’ response, and ours too for that matter, shows that as people, we overestimate ourselves. We think our hearts are much purer than they actually are. We think that we are always helping others for the right reasons. But often, even the things we do that look good are done for the wrong reasons. Often, we are obsessed with what we have and how the people around us think of us.

It is good that Jesus busts us out of the lies our pride speaks so confidently. It is good that he shows us that our highest devotion is often not to God, but to the riches of this world. But the problem isn’t only that we think too highly of ourselves. It’s also that we think too lowly of God.

The disciples in their distress, ask the important question about salvation: “Who then can be saved?” This question comes from an elevation of self and a demotion of God. And this is the theology that they had been wrapped in all their lives. They believed that God does not save people. He simply gives them the tools, namely his law, to help them save themselves. This is why the young man calls Jesus “teacher” instead of “Messiah.” And as Jesus talks about only God being good, he is not offended that the man is mislabeling him. He is offended that the man sees in Jesus a guide to earn perfection instead of the one who brings it.

In our age, Jesus is often looked at as our spiritual personal assistant, an advisor to give us some tips and tips when it comes to living a godly life. And there are some that we listen to, but there are others we decline as if they were only advice. But Jesus is not your teacher. And if you see Jesus simply in the role of personal advisor, then you don’t really know Jesus. You’re in the same boat as this man who walks away in sadness because he relied on himself instead of God.

“For people, it is impossible, but not for God, because all things are possible for God.” Eternal life would not be earned. There was nothing that man or the disciples or you and I can do to obtain it. But the man was right that eternal life is inherited. It is given freely. Because while perfection is impossible for you and me – while we will never do that one thing we lack – perfection is not impossible for Jesus Christ, true God and true man.

When the devil tempts you to stand confidently before all God’s commands and say, “I have kept all these since I was a child,” remember the rich young ruler. Remember that Jesus took all the wind out of his sails to help him see himself in an honest light. And remember that his law does the same for us as well. It kills our overestimation of ourselves. But Jesus also reveals that God can accomplish the impossible. He can and does bring salvation to you and to me not in the teacher, but in the Savior. So, rest your head against the cross. Find peace in Jesus and not in yourself. Because eternal life is yours in him, undeserved and freely given. Amen.