

Living Lastly

Devotional Reading: 1 Samuel 2:1-10
Background Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30

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¹⁷ “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

¹⁸ “Which ones?” he inquired.

Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁰ “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

²¹ Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich 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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

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²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

²⁷ Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

²⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at 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 wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Key Text

“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” —Matthew 19:24

Introduction

A. Checking All the Boxes

The phrase “checking all the boxes” refers to meeting all the requirements to complete a given procedure. For example, a homebuyer must carefully complete all items on the “must-have” checklist before making an offer to purchase. That’s the concept in a positive sense (or one intended to be positive), as it serves as a tool to leave nothing to chance when something important must be done. We will see this intent in today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Context

The encounter recorded in today’s Scripture occurred only a few weeks before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. The location was on the eastern side of the Jordan River (Matthew 19:1). This region was also referred to as *Perea* by Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian. Today’s Scripture text has parallels in Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30.

The first part of the lesson is our consideration of Jesus’ encounter with an unnamed man whom we refer to as “the rich young ruler.” That designation results from combining descriptions in the three accounts of the synoptic Gospels: the man was *rich* (Matthew 19:22; Mark 10:22; Luke 18:23), he was *young* (Matthew 19:22), and he was a *ruler* (Luke 18:18). Because he is described as being young, it has been suggested that he was probably not a member of the Jewish ruling body known as the Sanhedrin, but a “ruler” of a local synagogue. By the time we get to chapter 19 in the Gospel of Matthew, opinions about Jesus had become polarized (compare John 7:12). Luke 9:51–18:14 records the events that happened between the end of Matthew 18 and the beginning of Matthew 19.

This time frame featured several tense and pointed encounters with Pharisees and other individuals. These encounters continued into Matthew 19:1 and beyond as Jesus “left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.” One such encounter is the subject of today’s text.

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 3: Life in God’s Kingdom

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the Old Testament commandments Jesus cited.
2. Explain what Jesus meant by the first being last and the last being first.
3. Identify any “do more to get right with God” habit in one’s life and seek the Spirit’s guidance in breaking free of it.

Lesson Outline

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- B. Lesson Context

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- A. Sincere Question (v. 16)
- B. Initial Reply (vv. 17-19)
- C. Sincere Claim (v. 20)
- D. Further Challenge (v. 21)
- E. Sad Reaction (v. 22)
The Unexpected Test

II. The Savior’s Instruction (Matthew 19:23-30)

- A. Stunning Declaration (vv. 23-24)
- B. Surprised Reaction (vv. 25-27)
- C. Solemn Promise (vv. 28-30)
The Most-Coveted Airplane Seat

Conclusion

- A. Rethinking the Boxes
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

I. A Seeker's Inquiry

(Matthew 19:16-22)

A. Sincere Question (v. 16)

16. Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

Each of the three Gospel accounts of this encounter offers interesting details that the other two do not (see Lesson Context). Whereas Matthew's account begins simply by saying *a man came*, Mark 10:17 adds that the man came by running and kneeling before Jesus. The account that begins in Luke 18:18 states at the outset that the man was "a certain ruler" (see Lesson Context).

There are variations in the ancient Greek wording of the first part of the man's question—variations not necessarily seen in an English translation. But there is no variation in two words: the man's inquiry about *eternal life*. This phrase is comparatively rare in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Matthew, it appears in Greek only three times, and two of those three occur in today's study. The third occurrence is in Matthew 25:46, where "eternal life" is contrasted with "eternal punishment" (similar is Matthew 18:8). All told, these three Gospels use this phrase a total of nine times.

Even so, the rare use of the phrase *eternal life* in the synoptic Gospels is balanced by the fact that all three include the dialogue with the rich young ruler. The man's question is a good one, and the answer is still vital today. The man appears to have been familiar with Jesus' teaching regarding eternal life (John 3:14-16; 5:24; 6:40; etc.). Certainly, he is to be commended for approaching Jesus as he did, possibly risking the criticism of the Sanhedrin.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone claiming to have eternal life only because of their acts of goodness?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture references come to mind that support your response?

B. Initial Reply (vv. 17-19)

17. "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."

Rather than answer the man's question, Jesus first challenged him with a question. He wanted the man to consider whether he knew what he was asking. The man had used the word *good* in his question to Jesus, but did he grasp its significance? Jesus encouraged the man to think beyond *something* good to *someone* good. Jesus wanted to draw his attention away from what good thing he must do and toward an acknowledgment of God's goodness. Using "religious language" without depth of understanding can be very easy.

Not waiting for a reply, Jesus addressed the man's question about eternal life: he needed to *keep the commandments*. Jesus' response was similar to what he told "an expert in the law" who had inquired about eternal life (Luke 10:25-28).

Jesus' response to the rich young ruler mirrored a typical reply from a first-century Jewish rabbi. Jesus intended to provoke self-reflection within the young man. It raises the question of why merely following the commandments was not fulfilling enough. If the young man was obeying these laws, why didn't it quench his thirst for eternal life?

18a. "Which ones?" he inquired.

Only Matthew records this response by the man. It seems to indicate his understanding that the various individual statutes within the Law of Moses can be rank-ordered from "necessary for salvation" downward. If this is the man's viewpoint, he is not alone (compare Matthew 22:35-36; Mark 12:28). This is understandable given that the Law of Moses consists of over 600 statutes!

How to Say It

Arimathea	<i>Air-uh-muh-thee-uh</i> (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Josephus	Jo-see-fus.
Perea	Peh-ree-uh.
Sanhedrin	<i>San-huh-drun</i> or <i>San-heed-run</i> .
synoptic	<i>sih-nawp-tihk</i> .

E. Sad Reaction (v. 22)

22. When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

The young man's reaction to Jesus' challenge reveals that he had broken the First Commandment. That's the one that says to have no other gods before the one true God. Think about it! By disobeying Jesus, was the man not honoring his *great wealth* above God? Luke's account includes this stark contrast: "When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy" (Luke 18:23). What Jesus told the man to do was not what he expected to hear.

We have no further information in Scripture about the rich young ruler. We do not know whether he ever changed his outlook and decided that he would do what Jesus commanded. Note that Jesus did not pursue the man or offer to negotiate with him. Jesus never changed and never will change the conditions to be his follower. However, this fact does not mean he is not saddened by any decision to reject those terms. This young man *went away sad*, but we can be sure there was a greater sorrow in the heart of Jesus.

The Unexpected Test

When I entered the office of the Department of Motor Vehicles, a staff member asked if I was there to attempt a retest. It was my third day and third attempt at passing. Since I had been driving for 21 years, I believed I knew the rules. I held a driver's license from another state to prove it. But our move across state lines meant I had to pass my new state's driving exam to get a license.

My first two attempts at the test confronted me with a harsh truth: I did not know as much as I thought I did. I finally studied the traffic regulations and passed on the third attempt.

The rich young ruler who approached Jesus seemed sure he had passed the test. He seemed to know God's "traffic manual" (the Old Testament) pretty well, and he honored it. Also, to the man's credit, he attempted to "make sure" by asking what he still lacked. He certainly went to the right source for the answer! But the man found the answer to be unacceptable. He failed the test he expected to pass.

18b-19. Jesus replied, "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother," and "love your neighbor as yourself."

In response, Jesus quoted portions of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:2-17 (compare Deuteronomy 5:7-21). He also quoted Leviticus 19:18 (compare Matthew 22:39).

C. Sincere Claim (v. 20)

20. "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

The young man, who had asked what good thing he could do to receive eternal life, appeared to take heart from considering the commandments Jesus had listed. The man's claim to have *kept* these commandments sounds somewhat arrogant, though Jesus offered no reaction to the claim. The man does appear to have lived a morally upright life, perhaps similar to how Paul described himself as being "faultless" regarding a legalistic form of righteousness in his pre-Christian life (Philippians 3:6). The young man knew something was missing. It was likely with great anticipation that he asked, "*What do I still lack?*"

D. Further Challenge (v. 21)

21. Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Jesus knows every person's heart (John 2:24-25; 6:61, 64; 13:11). Everyone has one or more weak areas that prevent being *perfect* (compare Matthew 5:48; Romans 3:10-12; Hebrews 7:19). And Jesus knew what that was in this man's case.

What Do You Think?

What attitudes prevent believers from being perfect, like our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48)?

Digging Deeper

What "go, sell, and give" type of steps might be necessary to help a believer avoid these attitudes?

The Bible is full of tests (examples: Genesis 2:17; 2 Corinthians 2:9; 8:8; 13:5-7), and we will experience those that are common to humanity. A big problem presents itself, however, in accepting what God's "passing score" is (contrast 2 Corinthians 10). How will you ensure that you will pass that test? —J. M.

II. The Savior's Instruction

(Matthew 19:23-30)

A. Stunning Declaration (vv. 23-24)

23. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Sometimes Jesus' public teaching or encounter with an individual was followed by instructions directed toward *his disciples* (examples: Matthew 13:10, 36; 19:10-12). Here Jesus provided further teaching concerning the threat that riches can pose to one's progress toward *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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

To illustrate his point, Jesus used hyperbole—a statement exaggerated for effect. Some have suggested that an ancient wall in Jerusalem had a small gate called "The Needle's Eye" through which a camel might pass with some difficulty, but only without any baggage or cargo. But that gate was not built until the Middle Ages. Jesus was talking about something impossible for a human being. He emphasized that impossibility with the mental picture of a large *camel* trying to pass *through the eye of a needle*.

B. Surprised Reaction (vv. 25-27)

25. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

The shocked response of *the disciples* shows that the hyperbole Jesus used did in fact grab their attention. In the first century, many believed wealth was a sign of God's favor. So, if the wealthy could not be saved, nobody could. Jesus was teaching the disciples that only God can grant

salvation, not a person's actions or status. Not long before the rich young ruler approached Jesus, the disciples tried to shoo away children whom they considered a nuisance to Jesus, only to learn that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14). And now, a man whom the disciples considered a "shoo-in" for the kingdom was being declared unworthy to enter it.

26. Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Whenever people create their own categories of who is worthy or unworthy to be saved, the result can be blindness to the truth that it is *impossible* for humans to purchase their salvation (compare Acts 8:18-20). Only God can address this dilemma, which is why Jesus came to our fallen, broken world (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus' statement does not imply that rich people cannot be saved or enter into a right relationship with God. Both Abraham and Job were wealthy men. Joseph of Arimathea, who provided a tomb for Jesus' burial, is described as both a rich man and a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 27:57). The issue comes down to what controls a person's life: wealth or God. Poverty is not a key to Heaven, nor are riches an automatic pathway to Hell. One may have great wealth and love God supremely, or one may have very little and love it more than God. It is the condition of the heart that makes the difference. Jesus concluded his parable of the rich fool with a warning to the person who "stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

What Do You Think?

What steps should believers take to ensure their material wealth does not hinder their following God?

Digging Deeper

What practices and behaviors might you undertake that would result in you being "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21)?

27. Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”

-Matthew 19:24



Visual for Lesson 12. Have this visual on display as you discuss the lesson commentary associated with Matthew 19:24.

If any of Jesus’ disciples had a comment or question in response to something Jesus said or did, it was usually *Peter* (examples: Matthew 15:15; 16:22; 26:35; Mark 9:5; John 13:8, etc.). Jesus had just challenged a rich man to relinquish control of his possessions for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. As Peter pointed out, the disciples had *left everything to follow* Jesus, giving up their livelihoods (Luke 5:11, 28). What rewards awaited them for their choice to leave all to follow Jesus?

C. Solemn Promise (vv. 28-30)

28. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at 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.”

Jesus did not respond in terms of an earthly reward. Instead, he spoke of what will happen *at the renewal of all things* (compare Luke 22:28-30). At a time when Jesus will reign *on his glorious throne*, these twelve disciples will occupy *twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*. Perhaps at this point, the disciples were still thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom and an earthly throne that Jesus would establish in Jerusalem. Most likely, this regeneration refers to the establishment of the new heavens and new earth that will characterize Jesus’ return (2 Peter 3:10-13). The word translated as “renewal of all things” is quite rare in the New Testament. It occurs only

twice: here and in Titus 3:5 where it is translated as “rebirth”: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Christians anticipate the regeneration to come because of their current status of having been renewed.

29. “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

A magnificent reward awaits not only those disciples standing before Jesus as he spoke but also anyone who gives up earthly possessions and relationships for his *sake*. The return on investment (so to speak) will be eternal. It will be a wealth that differs from anything the world can offer (compare Matthew 6:33).

The blessing of *eternal life* is what the rich young ruler had inquired about. That life begins with the personal knowledge of Jesus as Lord (John 17:3); that life is brought to fullness by eternity with him in Heaven. That is the life that awaited the rich young ruler had he been willing to follow Jesus on his terms.

30. “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

Nothing illustrates this statement better than the incident recorded in Matthew 19:13-15, just before today’s text. Children (whom the disciples considered an inconvenience to Jesus) are the prime examples of what his kingdom residents should look like, while the rich (whom the disciples viewed as having a guaranteed place in the kingdom) are the least likely to dwell there.

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to develop an attitude of humility reflective of God’s kingdom residents?

Digging Deeper

Who will be an accountability partner to help you as you make these steps?

The Most-Coveted Airplane Seat

The passenger with the first-class seat in the front row had strong words for me. I was a cus-

tomter service representative for a major airline. I understood why an airliner's first row is so sought after: it granted, among other things, the privilege of exiting the plane first. The one who occupied the seat that day, however, ended up being the last of 150 persons to exit the aircraft.

The problem was with our ground equipment. It prevented us from bringing the passenger stairs to the plane's front door. So we had to go with our backup plan and use the stairs at the rear of the aircraft. As a result, those expecting to be first off the plane became last off, and vice versa. Therefore, I found myself bearing the brunt of the first-class passenger's annoyance.

Sometimes it's a good thing to desire to be first (example: 2 Corinthians 8:10). But usually, that's not a good desire because it betrays a self-centered motive. Those who take such a path will end up with the opposite of what they expect (Matthew 21:31; Mark 9:35; etc.).

And stepping outside the Bible, we encounter wisdom in this well-known axiom: "Be careful what you ask for, because you may just get it." The landscape of Christianity is littered with the wrecked ministries of high-profile preachers whose egos took over—the resulting lack of accountability followed by ministry disaster.

Saul, a one-time persecutor of Christians, came to his senses as he transitioned into being the apostle Paul (compare and contrast 1 Corinthians 4:9; 15:9; Philippians 3:4b-14). Two thousand years of hindsight reveal him to be the number one apostle, a role he did not seek but accepted as God's will. What does it take to have such an attitude today?
—J. M.

Conclusion

A. Rethinking the Boxes

The episode of the rich young ruler sounds a warning to those who want a Christian faith that will not require a change of lifestyle or a reordering of priorities. Jesus did not and does not command every seeking sinner to sell everything and give the money away. Jesus did so to the rich young ruler because Jesus knew what the man valued. Anything we put before God in our

hearts is an idol and must be dealt with in the same decisive manner. The young man wanted to ensure he had "checked all the boxes" to obtain eternal life. He sincerely believed he was on the cusp of meeting the requirements. If there was even one thing left undone, one box remaining unchecked, then surely Jesus would tell him what that was. And Jesus did! Ultimately, the man's problem was that something other than God was on the throne of his heart (compare 2 Timothy 4:10).

"Rich" is a relative term. The wealth of Solomon is legendary (1 Kings 3:13; 10:23). But none of the countless servants he had in his palace would match the efficiency and effectiveness of our "servants" of modern refrigerators, microwave ovens, etc. If he was considered to be rich, then what are we? When our hands produce wealth, do we remember who gave us those hands to do so in the first place (Deuteronomy 8:17-18; compare Daniel 4:28-33)? Paul's admonition to Timothy still applies: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17; compare Psalm 62:10).

What Do You Think?

How has this Scripture text changed your considerations on material wealth?

Digging Deeper

What will you do in light of this change?

B. Prayer

Father, strengthen us when the world's standards and priorities tempt us. Help us to take an honest look at our lives and to be honest about whether our possessions possess us. Mold us into disciples of Jesus, willing to stay the course and assured that whatever we yield control of, you will more than compensate for in ways we could never imagine. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The life that lasts puts God first.