

**“A Troubled Man Meets Jesus”**  
**Matthew 19:16-30**  
**January 27, 2019**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

It is clear from the text of today’s passage that the man approaching Jesus is a troubled man. He comes to Jesus troubled, asking “What do I still lack?” It would seem that he lived with a lack of meaning in his life, with a pervasive sense that something was missing. The New Testament is filled with troubled people who approach Jesus, so this man is not unique. What does make him unique is that he is the only person in the New Testament I can think of who comes to Jesus troubled and leaves in the same condition. We’re told that “he went away sorrowful” (v. 22).

This man was troubled in spite of the fact that he had the things that people of all cultures think are needed to relieve our troubles. He was rich, and he was young. In Luke’s account of this story, he adds that this rich young man was also a ruler. So he also had power. In spite of possessing an abundance of all the things that people think deliver us from troubles, he was troubled. Apparently, money, power and youth are not enough to relieve our troubles.

Studies have been done to measure the rates of depression in various countries of the world. America, despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, is the third most depressed country in the world. Do you know which age group has seen the largest increase in rates of depression? Though women from age 40-55 have the overall highest rate of depression, rates of depression are growing fastest among those aged twelve to seventeen. Those rates have risen fifty percent in the last ten years, from 8.7% to 12.7%.

I don’t plan to talk about depression today, nor do I want to suggest that medical treatment of depression is unnecessary or unspiritual. What I do want to talk about is how Jesus relieves our troubles. Perhaps you’ve come here today deeply troubled, like this man. If so, you’ve come to the right place, because Jesus has promised to be here. Sometimes we learn more from a failure story than a success story. This is a failure story, as this man failed to find help in Jesus, but it teaches us a great deal about how we can find help in Jesus.

**I. The Source of His Troubles**

The source of this man’s troubles, which is always the source of human trouble, is in his theology. It was deficient theology—wrong views of God—that

first brought such trouble upon the human race when Adam and Eve sinned, and it is deficient theology that always lies at the heart of our troubles. It is not inadequate money, poor health or the way others treat us. Those can all be problems that lead to suffering, but the root of our biggest problems is always theological. That is actually good news, because with God's help it can be corrected, and it can be corrected today.

So let me show the deficiencies in the rich young man's theology. Matthew gives us a hint in the first word from his lips—"Teacher." In Matthew's Gospel, it is always a bad sign when someone addresses Jesus in that way. Matthew doesn't want us to think that it is wrong to think of Jesus as a teacher, because he certainly is. The problem is that he is much more than a teacher, and until we recognize that he is also Lord, we have a deficient theology.

The next hint Matthew gives us is in the verb used in his question. He asks, **"What good deed must I do to *have* eternal life?"** The story also closes with the same verb when we are told that the man *had* great possessions. He seems to view eternal life merely as something to possess for his own benefit. He had already been a successful businessman, a good father and a good son, and respected in his community. Now he wants to make sure that he will be a success with God as well.

Did you notice how Jesus challenges his question? **"Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good."** He is seeking to direct this man's attention away from himself and toward God. This man is radically self-centered rather than being God-centered, and Jesus sees right through him. So Jesus tells him that there is only one who is good because this man believed something else occupied that place of ultimate good. He believed money was good, even better than God. As we are going to see in our next point, Jesus points him to the Ten Commandments as the way forward for him. We see here that he doesn't even make it to first base with the Ten Commandments because he violates the first one. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." There is only one ultimate good and it is God. To put anything else in the place of God is called idolatry, and this man was guilty of it.

His idolatry is revealed in Jesus' command to him to **"sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me"** (v. 21). Jesus was presenting him with the opportunity to give himself for the one who is ultimately good, Jesus himself. But to do so, he would have to forsake his idol of money. As it turns out, this young man didn't possess money—it possessed him. Several years ago, the movie *Fever Pitch* portrayed a young man who was a fanatical Boston Red Sox fan. He structured his entire life around the Red Sox. His love of the Red Sox becomes a problem when he develops a relationship with a young woman and begins to fall in love with her. He is excited to give her a place in his life, but trouble develops when that place turns out to be a lower priority than the Red Sox. He wants to fit her

in and even love her, but in a place subservient to his greater love of his beloved baseball team. A turning point in the movie is when a friend asks him, “You love the Red Sox, but have they ever loved you back?” The rich young man in our story reminds me of this Red Sox fan. He wants to fit God as an ally to his greater devotion to his money and possessions. So the source of his trouble is his idolatry.

## II. Jesus’ Prescription for His Troubles

Jesus’ response to this man has puzzled many in evangelical churches, because he seems at first glance to give a works answer to the man’s question. He is asked a direct question of how to have eternal life and answers, **“If you would enter life, keep the commandments”** (v. 17). The young man then wants to know which commandments he is to keep, which is not a good sign. All the commandments are from God, to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, Jesus doesn’t quibble with him about the obvious problems with this question, but proceeds to give him the commandments on which he can focus. He tells him to keep the second half of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments easily divide into two sections, with the first four describing our relationship with God and the last six our relationships with others. Jesus lists the commands in the second group, starting with the sixth and going in order through the ninth and then skipping back to the fifth commandment to honor one’s parents. He then gives the summarizing commandment of these six, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** Notice there that “neighbor” is singular. It is one thing to love “neighbors” in a theoretical sense, and quite another to love the one neighbor right in front of you. In his biography of Karl Marx, Isaiah Berlin reports that Marx had a low esteem for actual working-class people, even though he wrote frequently of their value as a group.

Why does Jesus focus on the neighbor-love commands in the second part of the Ten Commandments? I think it is because it is easier to fool ourselves about the commands related to God. Anybody can claim to love God and it would be hard to challenge the claim. But the second table of the law, containing the commands related to neighbor-love, is more easily seen. But still this man thinks he has kept all these. Since he lacks self-awareness to a rather significant degree, Jesus applies neighbor-love specifically to this man. **“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”**

In saying this to the young man, Jesus is pointing out that his self-assessment as one who has kept the law needs revision. How can he say that he has loved his neighbor as himself when he has an abundance and many around him are suffering significant lack? Further, the command to follow

Jesus, and his unwillingness to do so, reveals that he has also failed to keep the first commandment. When forced to choose between money and God, he chooses the former.

What is Jesus doing here, and how is all this answering the question the young man led off with, the question about how to have eternal life? The Bible is crystal clear in its answer to that question, and Jesus' response here is consistent with it. Salvation is only by faith and not by works. But the first point of salvation is always the same—coming to realize that you need saving. We must all come to realize the truth of Step 1 of AA: "I came to believe that I was powerless over alcohol and my life had become unmanageable." Jesus uses the law of God to help this man see his need of salvation. Jesus' invitation forced him to make a decision we all must make. He had a choice between his money and following Jesus, and it was really a choice of who would be his God. The path out of his troubled life would have been to choose Jesus. Sadly, he made the wrong choice.

It is the same for us. One of the questions people have of this passage is whether Jesus requires all of us to sell all we have and give to the poor. As in all questions of interpretation of the Bible, we have to interpret Scripture with Scripture, using the clear passages to help us understand the more difficult verses. It is abundantly clear from the rest of the Bible that this requirement is not placed on all. The book of Proverbs uses the lowly ant to commend the wisdom of saving money (6:6-8). Paul urges families to care for needy family members, and money is required for that. Zacchaeus is commended by Jesus, and he gave half of his money away rather than all of it (Luke 19:8). It needs to be added, though, that if this brings you any comfort, that's a bad sign.

The truth is that money is one of the most common false gods ever, because it represents human achievement. If human ability can achieve something, money can buy it. Giving our money away is one of the best ways to resist this idol. The Bible says that the path of wisdom is to honor the Lord with the firstfruits of our crops (Prov. 3:9). The challenge in giving the firstfruits is that the *second* fruits are still unknown, requiring the giver to trust God. The story is told about a farmer who had a cow that gave birth to two calves. The farmer told his pastor, "When I sell them, I'll give the proceeds of one of the calves to the church." A few weeks passed, but the farmer never gave anything to the church. He then told the pastor, "I'm sorry to report, Reverend, that the Lord's calf died before I could sell it." The problem for those who worship this idol of money is that it is always the Lord's calf that dies. We wait to see what we have left after our needs and wants are satisfied.

### **III. Jesus' Lessons for All Troubled People**

In the final paragraph of our text, Jesus teaches his disciples about this encounter with the rich young man. He summarizes with two lessons. He begins with this famous saying that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Some have explained this by saying that there was a small gate in Jerusalem called “Eye of a Needle,” and that a camel had to stoop low to get through it. The truth is that no such gate exists nor has ever existed. The disciples’ reaction to this makes it clear that Jesus is saying that it is humanly impossible for a rich person to enter heaven. After the disciples ask, **“Who, then, can be saved?”** Jesus gives his first lesson. **“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”** (v. 26). What this rich young man should have done was to fall on his knees and ask Jesus to do the impossible, to break the hold the idol of money had on his life before it destroyed him.

The second lesson is prompted from Peter’s question. **“We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”** Peter’s question seems to be a little self-serving, having the flavor of, “What’s in it for us.” Instead of rebuking Peter, Jesus gives him a wonderful promise. All who leave their idols to follow Jesus will be given many times more in the new world. The word for “new world” is literally the “new genesis.” Jesus will be sitting on his throne, and all who have followed him will be rewarded a hundredfold and will also inherit eternal life, the very thing the rich young ruler asked about. Jesus doesn’t rebuke Peter’s desire for these things, but applauds him for trusting Jesus for them.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I like Frederick Bruner’s summary of this passage and its teachings. “How, then, finally, do we come to eternal life? By ‘Keeping the Commandments!’ How do we do that? By giving up our gods. How do we do that? By following Jesus. This is the text’s full answer to the question of eternal life.”

Everything in this life and the next depends on who or what you trust in. Those who trust in money, like the young man of our story, will end up with nothing. Those who trust in Jesus will end up with everything. And we don’t have to wait for the next life to begin enjoying the benefits of our salvation. We get to have fellowship with Jesus as we follow him. So Jesus invites you today to trust him, whether for the first time or for the one-thousandth time. Repent of whatever else you’ve been trusting in. Walk away from it, no matter how costly it may feel to do so. Do what Abraham did when he offered up his own son, Isaac, saying, “The Lord will provide.” Do you believe that?