

## Mark 10:17-27

<sup>17</sup>As 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?”

<sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God. <sup>19</sup>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.’ ”

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

<sup>21</sup>Jesus 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.”

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

<sup>24</sup>The 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! <sup>25</sup>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.”

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

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

## What must I Do?

### I.

There I was, contemplating my project. It seemed simple enough—perhaps I should say, straight-forward enough. Projects often aren’t *simple*, but take the steps one by one and things aren’t that difficult. Of course, get deep enough into the project and you often find that there is more to do and more complexity than initially thought.

The project I was contemplating was my first experience with a porch or deck. What I *thought* I was going to do was merely replace a few rotten boards. Reality, however, was that everything about the porch needed to be replaced. I quickly had to learn how to build the whole thing, rather than just replace a little bit. Of course, I didn’t have all the necessary tools, which meant that I had the privilege of looking for some new toys—I mean, tools.

Often when doing a project you start with some preconceptions. Perhaps you think it won’t be too difficult or take too much of your time. But often there is more than initially expected—sometimes a *lot* more. Maybe a few questions are in order so you don’t run into things you weren’t prepared for. You look for someone who is more well-informed on the subject than yourself so you can get some advice. If possible, you look for an expert.

Perhaps that’s what the rich young man thought. He went to find Jesus because he believed he was looking to the experts. Jesus was a kind of self-help service in the eyes of this man. Jesus was clearly a wise man, a great teacher. In asking his question he showed that kind of deference. He fell to his knees before the man who was considered to be a great Rabbi to ask for some advice from the experts for his conundrum.

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17, EHV). The question

showed the sincerity of the man; it showed that he was enthusiastic. His question was posed politely; it seemed like an eager student wanting to learn from a great teacher. The question also showed he was deeply religious. The burning question in his mind was the most important thing a person can ever want to learn.

Look carefully at his question. What jumps out at you, especially as you have grown to learn more and more about Christianity? He was looking for eternal life. He even used the word “inherit.” Did he recognize that eternal life was a gift? If he did, why did he use that two-letter word: “do”? Apparently, though he was seeking information about the right concept in life—the most important concept—he was looking in the wrong place. He was looking to himself. Looking to oneself to obtain eternal life means that a person is looking to the Moral Law. That puts the burden squarely on oneself.

That’s exactly what this rich young man was doing. He looked to himself and the way he had followed the law. He was sincere. He was well-respected. He was loved by people. He *thought* he was loved by God because of the exemplary way he had tried to conduct himself. Perhaps he didn’t remember the proverb: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it is the road to death” (Proverbs 14:12, EHV).

He came to Rabbi Jesus for the final touch to his already-exemplary life.

When he fell on his knees at Jesus’ feet he addressed the revered Rabbi as “Good teacher.” “Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God” (Mark 10:18, EHV). Before even going on with the rest of his answer, Jesus tried to get the young man to learn something. The young man should have recognized that he was speaking with God himself with the first words he spoke to Jesus. These words, however, seemed to go in one ear and right out the other. The young man ignored this part of Jesus’ response completely.

His response followed on the other thing Jesus said: “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’” (Mark 10:19, EHV).

The man responded: “Teacher, I have kept all these since I was a child” (Mark 10:20, EHV). Are *you* like the rich young man? Wealth, or lack of it, really has nothing to do with my question. We like to receive some sort of affirmation for our lifestyle and how we live our lives as Christians. We might even make certain choices in life or in the church specifically trying to get this affirmation. Donations of time or money to help the poor. Maybe a mission project somewhere. Perhaps the things we choose to help out with around the congregation. If these are undertaken just to look good in the eyes of others, then our reasons are much like the rich man.

Christian bookstores fuel these attitudes with Christian self-help books. You will find all kinds of methods you can follow and things you can do to help make your life better before God. Most of these books aren’t teaching you to *respond* to God’s love, but are filled with legalism. They are trying to tell you how your actions can get you closer to God. They are filled with Law motivation; in reality, they are teaching that it is your *obedience* that will make you eligible for forgiveness.

## II.

When Jesus recited several Commandments to the rich young man, he touched only on commandments that deal with our relationship with fellow human beings. Did the young man really keep these things *perfectly*—as God demands?

Little to no introspection seemed to happen. It’s so easy to jump to conclusions, especially when we’re trying to make ourselves look good when speaking with others. Of

*course* he had kept them. Of *course* you have, too. Especially on the surface.

Since this wasn't getting through, Jesus personalized the message of the law to this rich young man. "Jesus 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'" (Mark 10:21, EHV).

Pay special attention to the first phrase: "Jesus looked at him, loved him." God does not give his Law because he is harsh or uncaring; he gives it to us in love. God's love wants us to discover the important truth that it is impossible to become right with God by keeping the Law. We simply cannot do it well enough.

Some see Jesus' instructions to the rich man to sell everything and give it to the poor as a prescription for all Christians. That is not the case. Possessions were the top priority for this man—possessions had become his gods. This was the trap of the Law the man needed to see. He was unwilling to give up his other gods to follow only the One True God. By pointing to this one thing, Jesus exposed the true diagnosis. Possessions weren't the problem, the order of importance the man put on his possessions was the problem.

The Law of God demands obedience from you, too; from the very places you would rather not see it reach. In today's Old Testament reading Amos writes: "There are those who hate an arbitrator in the city gate. They despise anyone who speaks honestly...<sup>12</sup>For I know that your rebellious deeds are many, and your sins are numerous, you who are enemies of a righteous man, you who take bribes. They thrust away needy people in the city gate" (Amos 5:10, 12, EHV). God knows what is going on, no matter how deeply you try to bury it inside. He can and does say of every human being: "your sins are numerous."

Where, exactly, is *your* infatuation? Where are your numerous sins? We want a Jesus who recognizes us we see ourselves—as "good" people. What we are is people who need to be shown our sins of gossip and grudges. We need to see ourselves as people who often refuse to help those who have genuine need.

Like the rich man, we think we are fine, upstanding individuals in the community and in our families. We want Jesus to acknowledge that in us. Instead, he confronts us with the secret thoughts and acts that we hide from society and our families that are too often *unfaithful*.

We want a Jesus who gives us all the necessities of life, just as the crowds who wanted Jesus to heal all their diseases and feed them all the time so they would never have to work again. Instead, Jesus confronts us as the sinners we are—sinners who regularly forget to receive what God gives us so generously with a thank-you.

### III.

All too often, when confronted with any of our sins, we have the same response as the rich young man: "When he heard this, he looked sad and went away grieving" (Mark 10:22, EHV). That's not the response God wants from the Law.

The primary purpose of God's Moral Law—in fact, you could probably call it the most important purpose—is to serve as a mirror, showing us that we have sinned. The law is designed to show us that we cannot ever hope to "do" enough. There are things in our hearts that are not right, and never have been. Jesus wanted the rich young man to look into the mirror and see that materialism had become his god and pulled him from the true God.

The purpose of God's Law as a mirror is to prepare us for the healing gospel. Jesus doesn't want to be just an example for us to follow. He doesn't want to be our enlightener—our self-help book on the road to improvement. He wants to act as the Savior.

That's what he wanted for the rich young man and that's what he wants for us.

#### IV.

"What must I do?" It's never quite enough. That's why the rich young man was asking for more advice. He knew, deep down inside, that what he *had* done was simply not enough. There had to be more.

Jesus *has done*.

Jesus took the whole load of the law's demands on himself. He kept the Law perfectly in place of all people. Sin demands a life as a payment. All the Old Testament sacrifices only pointed ahead to the *real* sacrifice that was necessary.

Jesus had already predicted his own death twice before and was about to do so again. He was about to go to the cross to pay for all sin, even though he, himself, was innocent of any sin. At the cross we see both the serious consequences of sin played out and the limitless love of the Savior-God. Jesus willingly removed the problem of our sin as he hung there on the cross. He didn't want us to carry the burden of trying to keep God's Law as a means for entering heaven—he knew we could never hope to achieve heaven that way. Jesus is more than a wise teacher—he is our Savior.

Even as the young man walked away with head hanging low, Jesus still had more to say to the disciples. In Jewish culture, much as in our own, it was admirable when wealthy people used what they had to help others. Jesus told his disciples: "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" (Mark 10:25, EHV).

Some commentators have speculated there was a very narrow gate to the city called the "eye of the needle." Loaded camels could not make it through the gate, so the packs would have to be removed before the camel could go to the other side, then the packs would be reloaded.

Jesus was talking about something much more impossible than having to unload a camel to get it through a city gate. You can tell by the reaction of the disciples. "They were even more astonished and said to one another, 'Who then can be saved?'" (Mark 10:26, EHV). If Jesus were talking about a gate to the city, the disciples would continue to ask the same question as the rich man: "What must I *do*?" Instead, they recognized that Jesus was saying no one—not even the obscenely wealthy—can purchase a ticket to heaven. Who, then, can be saved?

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'For people, it is impossible, but not for God, because all things are possible for God'" (Mark 10:27, EHV). The answer to "what must I do?" is "you can't do enough—you can't *do* anything." Salvation is impossible. But not for God. God has accomplished it in the work of the God-Man, Jesus.

Eternal life. That's what the rich man in this reading was seeking. He thought there was a formula. He thought there was a pat on the back coming for his previous righteousness and an easy answer to the one remaining thing he might need to accomplish.

Perhaps he should have listened to the last half of his own question: "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" (Mark 10:17, EHV). Rather than trying to do, give thanks for what Jesus has done. Give thanks that your name is written in his will—that you will *inherit* eternal life by faith in Jesus alone. Amen.