

## Introduction

We are now in Matthew's record of the final days of the public ministry of Christ (chapters 19-25). This section hangs loosely on the peg of kingdom consummation and the healing Jesus brings (and will bring) from all the effects of the fall (19.2). One way to see the implications of the teaching is to discover how the consummation of the kingdom (the not yet) impacts our present life in the "now" of the kingdom. Per 19.1-12, Jesus heals marriages and calls for special kingdom devotion. Per 19.13-15, little children have a place in the kingdom. They are pattern setters for entry into the kingdom and greatness in it. Now in our text for today (19.16-26), a question comes up about entry into kingdom glory forever. A man comes to Jesus asking how he can obtain eternal life: "**what good thing must I do to get eternal life?**" (v. 16). In the course of discussion, the question changes and becomes "**who then can be saved?**" (v. 25).

The flow of thought suggests this title for today's message, "Is It Even Possible to Obtain Eternal Life?" In outline, here is how we can answer this question: no, it is not possible, but yes, it is possible. The sound of contradiction is to instill reflection and cause us to probe deeply into the text. It goes without saying that this theme is big; the stakes are profoundly high, the safety of your life in total and forever is at stake. Serious reflection is surely in order. None of us should take the answer to this question for granted (no matter how many years we have been in church).

### 1A. No, it is not possible to obtain eternal life

The firm negative answer (*no*, it is *not* possible to obtain eternal life) should cause us to think hard about what is going on here in relation to our lives. To appreciate this side of the equation about eternal life, we need to follow the dialogue of Jesus with a rich man on one hand and with the disciples on the other hand.

#### 1B. Dialogue with the rich man [then later, dialogue with the surprised disciples]

There is an initial question, counter-question, and then there are questions and answers.

##### 1) The initial question (v. 16)

**And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"**

As the dialogue unfolds, we learn that this man was not only rich but also young. He had great possessions in the prime of his life when he could enjoy them most. Abundance was at his fingertips to supply his every desire and provide happiness galore, but there is a cloud in his blue sky. He recognizes the fact that his life is temporary. He has awareness that many young people do not have. He is aware that there is more to life than his youthful vigor and his great possessions. He seems to have a lot going for him. After all, he came to Jesus looking to him for instruction; he went to the right source; there is no better place on the entire earth for him to go. Just think of the privilege you would have if you could walk up to the Lord Jesus and ask Him a question that was burning in your soul.

This young rich man has a type of sincerity about eternal things. He not only values his life, his security, his possessions and material things, but he also values immaterial things. He would like to extend the security of his life to eternity. He has an interest in religion, in religious teaching from the Scriptures and the exposition of them by the teachers of the law, including Jesus. He wants one more possession: eternal life.

However, his approach to obtaining eternal life is legalistic. He says, **what good deed must I do to have eternal life?** He thinks that he can come to possess eternal life by something that he does. This reminds me of the fictional story of a man who became a guardian angel because he gave his life saving someone from drowning; so, once a year he now has the job, as an angel, of teaching people how to say, "merry Christmas." Many people believe that if you do some good deed, some good work, then you will become an angel or go to heaven. In "Sound of Music," the

nun receives blessings because she must have done “something awfully good.” That is a legalistic approach, climbing the ladder of the law to heaven; this is the ladder of good deeds to get you through the gate into the eternal kingdom. The young man is thinking within the Jewish tradition, which taught that salvation is something that man earns by doing good works.

## 2) Counter-question (19.17)

Jesus answers the man’s initial question with a question. That is, He shapes His answer by a question. His answer has the context of a counter-question. **And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments"** (19.17). The answer is at the very end of this reply, but the question at the beginning shapes it.

Counter-questions like this have the effect of prompting thought. We should be aware of the fact that Jesus interacted in this way with the young man and had Matthew record it to prompt our thinking. Where do your thoughts go when you read these words (**Why do you ask me**)? Is Jesus saying, “You came to the wrong person” (why ask me)? No, He is telling the man and us that eternal life involves a “you-me” relationship. You cannot simply get information from Christ about something you can do to gain eternal life. In the end, it all boils down to a personal relationship between you and Jesus Christ. That floats in the air that surrounds the answer about how you “**enter life.**”

Another contextual issue that floats in the air here is the fact that, “**There is only one who is good.**” This prompts thought about the holiness, the perfect holiness of God. Jesus is not saying that He is not God (like this: why do you come to me, when you should go to God instead?). No, He is giving something additional. He is saying, “The key is your relationship to me, and in that relationship, you must recognize the perfection of God, and come to terms with it.” We will come back to these things later. For now, we can focus on our Lord’s answer in light of them.

Accordingly, His direct, short, and unqualified answer is “**keep the commandments.**” What does the context indicate about the answer? It indicates two things. On one hand, it tells us that *the way to obtain eternal life* is to live a perfect life before God by His commandments. On the other hand, this context teaches that the key in our endeavors to keep God’s commandments is our connection to Jesus Christ.

## 3) Questions and answers (19.18-22)

It is clear that the man did not get the point for he says, “**Which ones?**” (19.18). We may wonder what he is getting at by inquiring about some specific commandments, but we need not wonder about his approach to the commandments in light of the holy perfections of God. His view of the law is not high enough. His view of man’s ability before the law is not low enough; he has a glib view of man before God and the holy standard of the law. He is a legalist of the rabbinic tradition that Jesus encountered and refuted repeatedly (as in the Sermon on the Mount, Mat 5-7). The man should see that religious interests, longings, knowledge, and good deeds do not insure that one has eternal life *because it is impossible to obtain life by what we do*. The standard is too high for us and our performance is too low for God.

Apparently, even though there was something missing in his life, this man was confident about his commandment keeping. By asking about specifics (“which ones?”), he shows confidence in his own righteousness. In effect, he says, “you name it, and I keep it; you name the commandments, and I keep them.” He is an ignorant legalist, overconfident, and self-sufficient.

Nonetheless, Jesus answered the request to be specific by citing five of the Ten Commandments and one of the two pillar commandments: **And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself"** (19.18-19). The Lord is being selective. If you think through these commandments, you will notice that He draws from the second table of the law (the last six of the Ten Commandments), but He does not mention one commandment in this group. If I pause, you can look the passage over and try to figure out which one is missing. He leaves out the tenth commandment regarding covetousness. Like the command about stealing, the tenth command relates to earthly possessions. Notably, the tenth commandment has a strong internal

dimension to it, coveting is a matter of the heart. The pillar commandment of love is the duty we have to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (v. 19b). This command goes even deeper into the heart than the tenth command does. It has both internal depth and external comprehensiveness. If you think about it honestly, should you not admit that you fail to keep the spirit of all the commandments? I should admit it. This man should admit it. You should admit it.

However, what reply does the man now give? He blindly and forcefully asserts his own righteousness before the law: **The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"** (19.20). The claim that he has kept them all suggests that the man does not think he lacks anything. There is thus a hint here (cf. Ridderbos, Matthew, 356) that he happily thinks that Jesus will commend him and assure him that he has eternal life (in effect, he says, what lack can there be? So, give me the assurance I seek).

At this point in the dialogue, a significant shift in thought incorporates the tenth commandment. Jesus combines the tenth commandment with the commandment of love. **Jesus said to him, "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"** (19.21). He tells him to sell all his possessions; this connects with the tenth commandment and tests his attachment to the things of earth. He also tells him to give to the poor; this connects with love for the neighbor and tests his attachment to Christ who calls for neighborly love in a concrete way. For Jesus says, sell, give, and come, follow *me*. Everything hinges on following Jesus Christ.

This is the way to eternal life that Jesus calls treasure in heaven. If you are to be perfect in your commandment keeping, you must sell all that you have and follow Christ. Being perfect here ties in with the point made earlier that only God is good. Clearly, the good of commandment keeping to which Jesus attaches the promise of eternal life is human perfection that conforms to the perfection of God. This way to life is radical to say the least; it calls for a response.

What was the young rich man's response? **He went away sorrowful (v. 22)**. He was not sorry for his sins; this was not a response of godly sorrow. He wanted something and he could only get it by giving up something he prized more highly. The reason for his sorrow was the fact that "**he had great possessions.**" This tells us that his attachment to temporary and earthly treasures was stronger than his desire for heavenly treasure. He wanted both. He had riches and yet sensed that material things are not sufficient to ground his life and give him eternal security. It turns out that his love for earthly possessions is idolatrous and greedy. It breaks the tenth commandment. This means that *He did not love God or his neighbor*. The man who claimed obedience to the law broke all Ten Commandments by breaking both commandments of love (to love God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself). Earthly things meant more to Him than God, and he could not forfeit earthly things on behalf of his neighbor. Now, Jesus turns to the disciples with a lesson.

#### 2B. Dialogue with the surprised disciples

**And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> 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." <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"** (19.23-25).

After the young rich man left their company, Jesus turned to the disciples with the lesson that it is only with difficulty that a rich person will enter the kingdom of heaven. The difficulty is not simply indicative of something challenging because Jesus tells us it is impossible. To illustrate His point, He says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of sewing needle than for a rich man to enter the gateway into the kingdom of God.

Hearing this point about a rich man coupled with the demand of perfection, a sense of astonishment overwhelmed the disciples. Thus, they expanded the idea of impossibility to everyone: **When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?"** (19.25). They got the point. For the rich man, the impossibility is that of a camel going through the eye of a needle. Moreover, they could see that the demand of perfection that the rich man failed to see is the demand that God requires of all people. The question of the disciples implies the answer that

it is not possible for *anyone* to obtain eternal life. God's law is high and man's ability to keep it is low: we all fall short of the perfect glory of God.

Thus, is it possible to obtain eternal life? No, that is impossible *for the rich* because they value things more than they value God. It is impossible *for all* because they worship the creature more than they worship the Creator, because they love themselves more than they love God, and more than they love others. They assert their autonomy and self-sufficiency in a foundational way. Accordingly, Jesus agrees with the shift from the rich man to all men. However, there is another side of the coin.

2A. Yes, it is possible to obtain eternal life

**But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"**  
(19:26).

With man, it is impossible to keep God's commandments, it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, and it is impossible for fallen men, women, and children to obtain eternal life. However, **with God all things are possible**.

After denying any hope to man's attitudes and efforts, Jesus then teaches that salvation is the work of God alone. God does what man cannot do; God does for sinners what they cannot do for themselves. With God, obtaining eternal life now, ahead of the consummation, is possible.

Implications and applications

1) Why is it impossible for man, for sinful man, to obtain eternal life?

The disciples' surprise shows that Jesus broadens the teaching from the wealthy for which there are peculiar pitfalls to all people in the fall. The wealthy teach the lesson of human autonomy in an acute way. In our rebellion, we suppress what we know of God and we substitute things in the place of God. We exchange the truth for a lie and we worship and serve the creature instead of the Creator. Those who are rich in the things of this world have the peculiar pitfall of wealth as the true god of their lives. Without question, they will never humble themselves to Christ. They will cling to their wealth always instead of clinging to Christ, but they represent all fallen sinners who cling to earthly things and their own asserted autonomy.

2) How is it possible to obtain eternal life by keeping God's commandments?

We must ask this question in light of the perfection that God requires. The possibility is not due to sheer divine power (that God can do anything). It is due to the work God gives Christ to do.

Christ obeys the commandments perfectly, in perfect righteousness. By faith in Christ, God gives His righteousness to us and with it, eternal life. The high and lofty standard remains high and lofty; human beings obtain eternal life by keeping the commandments perfectly because representatively. Jesus is the representative second Adam that keeps the law on behalf of others; He gives up all for the poor, for poor sinners dying in a famine for righteousness and unable to enter the kingdom of God.

He leaves many aspects about salvation off the table for the moment on this occasion. Matthew presents the account without expanding with any commentary on the ins and outs of God's saving grace. Clearly, the emphasis on the efficacious working of God in the saving of sinners is a major point that Jesus through Matthew gives to His church. Salvation is totally of the Lord depending on nothing in man, depending on no contribution from man, because with man it is impossible. However, with God it is possible. With God, it is possible and He in fact accomplishes it in the obedience of Christ to the commandments (the Ten and the Two).

3) How is it possible to obtain eternal life in light of our sins?

We read the book of Matthew knowing the end of the story. Like any story that we read and re-read, reflection on the story in its wholeness allows us to discover (and appreciate) more and more golden details in the story line.

Thus, we learn the grace of God in the gospel, that man's condition and hope of salvation would be utterly helpless and hopeless except for the fact that Jesus is the Passover lamb and as such, He gave His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins (Mat 26.17-19; 26.28).

Therefore, He keeps the commandments in our place to give us the perfect obedience necessary for eternal life, and He bore our sins in His own body on the cross to give us forgiveness necessary for eternal life.

4) How is it possible to obtain eternal life in light of our asserted autonomy?

After Jesus asks, "Why do you come to me," He says, "Follow me." We must follow Him; we must believe in Christ to find salvation, but this too is impossible for man. In our rebellion in the fall, we assert our autonomy and self-sufficiency. This is the very core of human sin. It is a shackle; we cannot break it. Thus, even if Christ fulfills our righteousness on the positive side of salvation, and even if He endures our punishment on the negative side of salvation, we still must entrust ourselves to Him in faith. However, this we will not and cannot do. It is impossible for man. The implication therefore is that faith is part of the gift of salvation that Jesus secured for His people by His holy life and His sacrificial death.

5) How is it possible to obtain eternal life in light of the demand to sell all?

What shall we say about the demand to literally sell all and give to the poor? Must all disciples do that in order to have treasure in heaven?

a) A vow of poverty does not merit or insure eternal life.

b) Jesus did not require this of all the rich He encountered (cf. 27.57; Lk 8.3; 19.2-9). He required it of this man specifically to teach him and to teach us.

c) The requirement teaches us about the broader issue of total surrender to Christ. He calls us to a total commitment and a willingness to forsake all for Him. This means we are willing to forsake all relationships in this world for His sake (to give priority to Him above father, mother, brother, sister, and children). It means that we are willing to forsake all our possessions for Him (to give priority to Him above all earthly things). Thus we are to order our lives in such a way that we prayerfully, willingly, and specifically place all that we are, represent, and own in subjection to Him and to the laws of His kingdom.

This is faith. There is no merit here. Faith is the entryway into salvation; it is the door to the house of salvation. It is part of the gift. Moreover, it is the entryway into all that God gives.

What would you do if Jesus asked you to sell your possessions combine the proceeds with all your savings and give it to the poor? You might quickly say, "I guess I would do it, but, of course, He does not ask that of people today. After all, the young rich man is an unusual case." However, He does ask this of you today because He requires absolute self-surrender. He requires that you make the choice of love for God above all earthly things. He requires that you place all that you are and all that you possess into service in His kingdom under the governance of Christ as your king. Among other things, this means that you give of your hard-earned money to promote the gospel to save and sanctify poor sinners.

Thus, you view your days in life under the governance of His six and one pattern. How you raise your children, how you carry yourself as a husband, how you act as a wife, and how you live your life in a fully *sacred* world, you gladly, prayerfully, and earnestly take up under the commandments of Christ clinging to Him as your mediator, your ladder of ascent from earth to heaven. You work hard at the commandments with repentance, but you trust fully and solely in the work of Christ in obtaining eternal life. This is astounding good news: given our condition in sin, Jesus secured all we need; in Him by faith, we have eternal life.

**To Him be all glory both now and forevermore, amen.**