

“Living Lastly”

Lesson Text: Matthew 19:16–30 **Background Scripture:** Matthew 19:16–30

Devotional Reading: 1 Samuel 2:1–10

Matthew 19:16–30 (NIV)

¹⁶ Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” 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.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” 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^[c] 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.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To identify the Old Testament commandments Jesus cited.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain what Jesus meant by the first being last and the last being first.
- **Daily Application:** To 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.

INTRODUCTION

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.

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 more than likely a “ruler” of a local synagogue. We can certainly commend this young man for coming publicly to Christ and asking about external matters. He seemed to have no ulterior motive and was willing to listen and learn. Sadly, he made the wrong decision. His encounter with Jesus is the subject of today’s text.

Seeker's Inquiry: Matthew 19:16-20

Each of the three Gospel accounts of this encounter offers interesting details. 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).

The rich young ruler addressed Jesus as "Teacher" and asked Him, "what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" The man was obviously sincere, though his approach to salvation was centered on works and not faith. But this was to be expected among the Jews of that day. However, in spite of his position in society, his morality, and his religion, he felt a definite need for something more.

But Jesus' reply did not focus on salvation. He forced the young man to think seriously about the word "good" that he had used in addressing Jesus. "Only One who is good," Jesus said. He 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.

Not waiting for a reply, Jesus addressed the man's question about eternal life: he needed to "keep the commandments" (v. 17). This imperative was intended to hit his point of pride, i.e. self-righteousness. Jesus did not believe that mere outward keeping of the commandments of the law brought anyone salvation. He had already told Nicodemus earlier that he must be born again (c.f. John 3:3; Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16). Why, then, did He tell this young man to keep the commandments? The rest of the story reveals the answer. Jesus will go to great lengths now to show him that he has not kept the commandments and, therefore, is in need of God's grace.

1. What was the first thing the rich young ruler said to Jesus? (Matthew 19:16-17)

In response, to the young man's question "which ones?" Jesus quoted portions of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:2–17. This list of commands in verses 18–19 of today's lesson centers on outward duties, rather than inward nature, which was the young man's real problem. He protested that he had kept these outward demands. Jesus then revealed his real weakness.

2. What commandments did Jesus list for the young man? (Matthew 19:18-20)

The Savior's Instruction: Matthew 19:21–30

The young man knew something was missing. It was likely with great anticipation that he asked, "What do I still lack?"

Jesus knows that no one can be perfect, but this man was looking for perfection so he could check off all the boxes to go to heaven.

Everyone has one or more weak areas that prevent being *perfect* (compare Matthew 5:48; Romans 3:10–12; Hebrews 7:19). Jesus knows every person's heart (John 2:24–25; 6:61, 64; 13:11), and Jesus knew what the weakness (sin) was in this man's case. Jesus knew that this man was covetous; he loved material wealth. By asking him to sell his possessions, Jesus was forcing him to examine his own heart and determine his priorities.

The young man's reaction to Jesus' challenge reveals that he was 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.

With all of his commendable qualities, the young man still did not truly love God with all of his heart (breaking the First Commandment, see Exodus 20:3). Possessions were his god. He was unable to obey the command, "Go, sell... come, follow me."

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. This young man went away sad, but we can be sure there was a greater sorrow in the heart of Jesus.

3. What did Jesus reveal about the young man that we did not know? (Matthew 19:21-22)

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*.

To illustrate His point, Jesus used hyperbole—a statement exaggerated for effect, saying that it is easier for camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. “When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” (v. 25).

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.

For the record, 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).

4. After the rich man walked away what did Jesus tell His disciples? (Matthew 19:23-24)

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)?

Peter was quick to see the contrast between the wealthy ruler and poor disciples, and his response to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” was most ill-timed and certainly reflected a selfish motivation. Nevertheless, Jesus answered the question.

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 (literally). 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. Jesus went on to say in verse 29 of today's lesson that 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.

5. What did Peter ask Jesus? (Matthew 19:27-29)

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.

6. What did Jesus mean by “many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first” (Matthew 19:27-29)?

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?

CONCLUSION

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).

What Do You Think? (Personal Question)

What in your life might you be putting before God?

Digging Deeper

What will you do to change this?

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.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The life that lasts puts God first.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week’s lesson is “Ministering Mightily” and summarizes Jesus’ description of what will happen at the final judgment. Study Matthew 25:31–46.