

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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IF YOU WANT TO ENTER LIFE

Matthew 19:16-21

One day, a man ran up to Jesus and asked this question: 'What can I do to have eternal life?' That is a big question, a question which we all want to know the answer. 'What can I do to have eternal life?' Imagine, having eternal life! But I am afraid that you might not like the answer. As we will see, the answer Jesus gave sticks to our throat like a fish bone.

This incident is recorded in three gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. We will read the account in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew 19:16-21.

Matthew 19:16. And behold, one came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"

17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."

18 He said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness;

19 Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

20 The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?"

21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

What is good

Here is a remarkable passage in which we find a man who was concerned for eternal life. We have no reason to doubt that he was sincere. He was young. He was rich. And Luke tells us that he was a ruler. Sensing a lack in his life, a lack that neither his wealth nor his position had erased, this young ruler approached Jesus and asked, *Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?* In this question, he declared his readiness to do some 'good' that he might obtain everlasting life. The word 'thing' is not in the original text. I don't think he expected that there is only one good thing that he had to do. He was asking, 'What is the good that I need to do in order to be saved?'

Jesus picked up on this word 'good' and immediately questioned him about his inquiry. He said, *Why are you asking Me about what is good?* What is the Lord doing here? What do you think is the point of the question? 'Why do you ask Me about what is good?' Jesus' question seems redundant since the rich ruler has just explained why he asked about the good. The reason why the man asked Him about what is good is because he wanted to know how to inherit eternal life, isn't it?

Well, if we take it in this way, we are missing the point of the Lord's intention. Jesus was actually inviting the young man to reflect on the meaning of his own words. He was saying, 'When you ask Me what good you need to do, my question to you is, 'Do you know what good is? What is your understanding of the word 'good'?'

This question is very important. When you talk to non-Christians, often you hear them say, 'I think I am good enough. I did not rob anybody. I did not kill anyone. I have been living a reasonably good life, at least as good as anybody else. Therefore I should be all right with God.' But here is the question. 'What do you mean by 'good'? What is your standard of good? What is good for you may not be good enough for the other person. What is good enough for you may not be enough for God.'

The Lord was saying to the rich young ruler, 'When you ask Me about doing good, do you have a definition of good in your mind? Do you understand what is good? Or should I explain it to you?'

And that is precisely what He did. Jesus went to tell him what is good. He said, *There is only One who is good.* In Mark and Luke, we read the phrase, *No one is good except God alone.*

God alone is good

What is the meaning of this reply? Jesus was saying, 'The only correct standard of goodness is God Himself. Only God is good. He is the only standard of goodness. Now, when you say, 'What good may I do,' do you understand the implication of your question? If you want to do something good to inherit eternal life, the good that you are going to do has to be a good which is in accordance with the nature of God who alone is good.'

You see, there is no work that can be defined as good as far as God is concerned unless it is a work which is in accordance with His character. And what is His character? We can sum it up in two words. His character is holy and it is love. It is holy and it is love. Therefore a good work would have to be a work which reflects God's character, namely what is holy and what is loving.

'Can you do that kind of work, young man?' That is the implication of the question. 'You want to have eternal life? OK. But can you do any work which meets the standard that God requires, which expresses the character of God? Can you live a life like this?'

And then, in the final part of His answer, the Lord Jesus said, *If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.* He asked this man to seek eternal life by keeping the commandments. This may not be in line with our understanding of salvation. We have learnt that we are saved by faith alone, and not because of any good things that we do. We thought that the rich man made a mistake by assuming that his salvation could be ensured by doing some good. Here, Jesus responded with the law and seemed to indicate that if one is going to have eternal life, acts of righteousness are required. He said nothing about believing. Why did He not give the same answer which Paul gave to the Philippian jailer? *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved* (Acts 16:31). That is a good point and we will discuss it in a moment.

A reflection of God's character

For now, let's continue to follow Jesus' train of thought. He has just said that 'good' can only be defined in terms of God's character. But that raises the question, 'How do I know what God is like? How can I learn about God's character?' Here is Jesus' answer: 'You know God's character by looking at the Commandments.' When you look at the Commandments, you begin to realize that God is both holy and loving. He is holy. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not do any of these sins. And he is loving because the Commandments are summed up in the words, 'You love your

neighbor as yourself.' 'You asked Me about doing good. That's the good you must do. Keep the Commandments. You have to accept God's standards and reflect His character.'

Notice carefully the commandments that Jesus listed:

- You shall not commit murder (Sixth)
- You shall not commit adultery (Seventh)
- You shall not steal (Eighth)
- You shall not bear false witness (Ninth)
- Honor your father and mother (Fifth)
- You shall love your neighbor as yourself (summary)

You know the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21). I wonder if you find it strange that Jesus did not start with the first commandment. He did not start with the second commandment. He did not even start with the third. He mentioned only that part of the Ten Commandments which deals with human relationships, namely the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Fifth, and their summary in the Neighbor-Command. How do you understand the selection of these commandments among the Ten?

The first commandment has to do with God. The second one has to do with God. The third one has to do with God. Yet, Jesus does not mention any of these. That is very striking. We would have expected Him to say, 'You shall have no other gods before Me,' or 'You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.' But He did not do that. He only pointed to the commandments that are concerned with the way we treat other people. How do you explain that?

You see, the question was about doing good. Now 'doing good' has more to do with the observable behavior toward other people than the more inward focus of the first four commandments which deal with our attitude to God. Jesus concentrated the man's attention on commandments of human relations because, while devotion to God-relation commands can be claimed, devotion to human-relation commands can be seen.

Jesus takes very seriously our dealings with people. There is where we express our spiritual life. There is where we show who we are spiritually. We can see the spiritual life of a person in action by observing the way he or she relates to other people. You may profess to have a deep devotion to Christ, but that profession is empty if your relation with people is problematic.

It is as though the Lord was saying to the rich young ruler, 'I do not doubt that you pray every day. That you offer your sacrifices without fail in the temple. That you regularly wash your hands to remain ceremonially clean. That in your heart you have a genuine reverence for God. All that is good. But many hypocrites claim to be like that too. The acid test comes when your relationship with others is under observation.'

These words are also for us. I do not doubt that most Christians consider themselves as being truly committed to Christ. But where is the evidence of that faith? The Lord tells us that it is in your relations to other people.

Does that mean that the other Commandments are not that important? Does that mean that our relationship with God does not matter as much so long as we get along with our neighbor?

That is of course a wrong conclusion. Because you simply cannot love your neighbor as yourself unless you love God with all your heart. You see, the second implies the first. Our loving the neighbor, our doing good to others, derives from our love for God. I do not love a person simply because he happens to be nice, rich or good looking. I love the person because I love God. Because

God means so much to me. Therefore you can see that the second part of the Ten Commandments cannot be implemented without the first part, namely our commitment to God.

Keeping the commandments

Let's go back to a question I mentioned previously. Can we be saved by the keeping of the law? This man asked, 'How can I be saved?' Jesus' reply was, 'Keep the commandments.' Did Jesus mean that by keeping the commandments, one can be saved? Not exactly. And here, I would like to be very clear. Let me explain it carefully in two points.

1. To keep God's commandments is a necessary part of salvation. Jesus declared in Matthew 5:17 that He did not come to abolish the law. He came to fulfill it. What God has declared still stands. The ceremonial aspects of the law are laid aside, yes, but the spiritual requirements of the law still stand. Christianity is not without rules. One cannot say that he is walking on the path to eternal life, and at the same time living in violation of the commandments. In that sense, keeping the commandments is a necessary part of salvation.
2. However, Jesus does not say that it is also a sufficient condition for salvation, that if you keep the commandments, you will enter into life. He actually said in Matthew 5:20 that simply to fulfill the requirements of the law as the scribes and Pharisees understood them is not yet to have met the demands of the kingdom of heaven. *Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

And on this point, it seems that the rich young ruler was aware that this is not good enough. There is no reason to doubt that his question in v. 20, *What am I still lacking?*, denotes a genuine perception that the mere observance of the law falls short of true goodness. He rightly looked for something more.

One thing you lack, Jesus said in Mark 10:21. *Go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.* The call to give all and follow Him is actually a call to faith for the man could not do what was being asked without trusting Christ wholeheartedly.

The disposal of everything

We have to admit that this was quite a radical command. It had more sweeping and immediate financial implications than any commandment Jesus had ever given. Why did the Lord order that? Why did He choose to confront this man with a demand which He has not made on many of his other wealthy followers, such as the hospitable family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-3), or the rich wife of Chuza (Luke 8:3), or the 'rich disciple' Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57), or even Zaccheus, the rich who promised to give away (only) half of his wealth plus restitutions (Luke 19:8)?

We feel very uncomfortable when we read this verse because it makes us wonder if Jesus also commands all of us who follow Him to sell all our possessions. The history of the interpretation of this passage is divided between those (the minority) who take it as a literal prescription which applies to every disciple and so rules out the acquisition of private property and those (the majority) who believe that it applies only to the rich young ruler. In my opinion, the command to sell all is not a general one, but a special precept needed in this case. Here is my explanation.

The rich man said to Jesus that he had kept the commandments from his youth. Then we are told in Mark 10:21 that *Jesus looked at him and loved him*. This is an important statement for two reasons: (1) it reflects Jesus' disposition toward the man; (2) it suggests that when Jesus 'looked at him,' He discerned a specific spiritual problem. The attachment of this man to his wealth was an obstacle to entering into the kingdom of God. Therefore having evaluated the state of his heart, Jesus issued the command that was necessary for the spiritual well-being of this man. 'Sell everything you have. Then come and follow Me.' So this was a particular call given on a particular occasion to an individual whose love of money was known to Christ.

Now, it would be a mistake to conclude that God never calls His disciples to sell all and give to the poor. This might be the case for certain individuals. There are people, for example, who made the choice to give up their income and all their possessions to further the cause of Christ in full-time traveling ministry. Sometimes God asks people to walk on the path of voluntary poverty, and we should not be too quick to dismiss that possibility for ourselves.

It would also be a mistake to think that because you are not rich, this verse does not apply to you. However differently the material detachment which Jesus requires may work out in different persons and circumstances, we would be parting company from Jesus' teaching if we lose sight of the principle that whatever we possess comes from Him and should be completely at His disposal. We hold our possessions only as stewards for Him, and it is His to give and take away at will. No one can claim to be a true follower of Christ unless he is willing to renounce all that he has for the sake of Christ.

The young man's final reply will serve in the rest of the passage (vv. 22-26) as an object lesson for the spiritual problems of the affluent. We will discuss those problems in the next lesson.