

## **What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?**

### **Matthew 19:16-30**

**Intro.** Who am I? Why am I here? How do I live the good life? What is my purpose for living? Where will I go when I die? There are what we sometimes refer to as the “ultimate questions” of life. Everyone asks them. Everyone thinks about them. Why? Because these questions go to the very heart of what it means to be human. They address our significance, importance and destiny. And think about this: the questions connect. How you answer one will influence how you answer the others.

One day a fine, respected man of the community came to Jesus. He was interested specifically in the question concerning final destiny. He framed the question this way: **what good must I do to have eternal life?** In the process of answering that question, Jesus also gave him insight concerning what or who really matters most in life. What you decide now will determine where you go later.

**Trans.** Who or what should have priority in my life? Jesus demands that people give him priority, first place, in their lives. Even second place is not an option where He is concerned.

I want us all to consider an important and significant question: what must I do to have eternal life? What must I do to encounter God’s kingdom? Let’s examine the answer given by Jesus.

I. It is easier than you think. 19:16-21

- This story is recorded in all three synoptic gospels (cf. Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30). Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and His cross. The disciples are with Him and our Lord is engaging them in teaching about true discipleship. They are struggling students who can't quite grasp what He is saying. The verses immediately preceding our text are crucial to our understanding of this event. Jesus has told them those who enter the kingdom of God must be like a little child (19:13-15). All must come to Jesus as a trusting child in total dependence on Him. No one can earn the kingdom. The requirement is the same for all. Simple child-like reliance on Jesus is how one gains eternal life. So having eternal life is possible for all, provided they follow three simple truths.

1) Go to the right person. 19:16

- It is in the context of this teaching about childlike faith that one who is the very opposite and antithesis of a helpless child approaches Jesus. **Someone came up to Him.** Mark 10:22 informs us he had great wealth. Matthew says he is young with **many** possessions. Luke 18:18 calls him a ruler. Putting all of this together we have popularly referred to him as “the rich, young ruler.” He was a “mover and shaker” in that day. He was certainly well known, a man of power, affluence and influence. Evidently he had heard Jesus teach and was impressed with what He said. He was eager to get to Jesus. Perhaps he would not have another opportunity to talk to this man whose teachings were unlike

any he had ever heard before. He saw Jesus as a distinguished rabbi, and paid Him appropriate respect calling him **Teacher**. This was a tribute to the impression Jesus had made on him. If this man was interested in the question of eternal life he had come to the right person.

- In John 6 Jesus feeds the 5,000 (men) and preaches His great “Bread of Life” sermon. In that sermon He tells the crowd that, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have [eternal] life in yourselves. Anyone who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, because My flesh is true food and My blood is true drink. The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood lives in Me, and I in Him” (John 6:53-56). This sermon did not receive a warm reception. In fact John 6:60 records some as saying, “This teaching is hard! Who can accept it?” And John 6:66 informs us that, “From that moment many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him.” Faced with a serious crisis, Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, “You don’t want to go away too, do you?” At that moment, Peter stepped up and came through by saying, “Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Peter knew the right person to go to for a word about eternal life. This young ruler, probably a synagogue official, knows the right person too. You must go to the right person on this issue. You must go to Jesus.

2) Ask the right question.            19:16

- Believing Jesus to be the right **Teacher** for insight into spiritual matters, this man asks Him one of those ultimate questions of life, **what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?** As a Jewish, religious leader he was almost certainly a devout, honest and

morally upright man. He knew what **good** is and yet there is uncertainty in his soul, turmoil and doubt in his heart. All his religion and ritual has not given him a confidence, a peace, concerning the destiny of his own soul. He lacked joy or a settled hope that eternal life was his. In fact it seems quite certain that the one thing he was clear on was he did not yet have eternal life as his very own. It was somehow missing and he wanted to know what he should do about it, what he should **do to have** it.

- This question is perhaps one of the most significant in all of the Bible and for all humanity: how do I get eternal life? In our passage the gift of the very life of God is called eternal life, entering the kingdom of God, having treasure in heaven, and enjoying the age to come. It is the life of God and life with God. It is the privilege of being a member of His kingdom and it must be received with the faith and reliance of a little child. We do not know whether the young ruler heard Jesus say this or not. His question, though by no means a bad one, implies he believes eternal life is something you earn, something you work for. **What good thing must I do . . .** Eternal life, however, is not achieved, it is received as a gift (John 1:12). The young ruler must have both a change of theology as well as a change of heart. Sill, in a sense, he asked the right question. Now we will see that you must:

3) Get the right answer.            19:17-21

- The word **good** occurs several times in verse 16-17. Jesus picks up on this word to help guide the rich, young ruler in the right direction. As is often the case, Jesus answers his question with a question: **Why do you ask Me about what is good?** However, He does

not wait for an answer from this man but provides His own: **There is only One who is good.**

- Jesus does not respond in kind to the gracious address of the young man. Actually, His response would have put him a bit on the defensive. Jesus puts the focus of the issue where it must be: on God who **only** is the source and essence of goodness. The young ruler's starting point was wrong because it was himself. **What good must I do . . .** Jesus directs him to look to God first and foremost. Any talk of eternal life should begin here. The rich young ruler was no doubt a "good man" by the standards of his day. He saw in Jesus another good man whose insight into spiritual matters could perhaps solve some lingering doubts and questions which obviously plagued his soul. Jesus forces him to look to God for any hope of genuine goodness and eternal life. He challenges the young ruler to think clearly and choose his words carefully, a challenge each one of us should accept.
- Jesus now presses the issue further. Explaining what it means to be **good**, He turns to the Ten Commandments, and the obligation they place on each of us. **If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.** Jesus' answer is not what a modern-day evangelical would expect him to say. Our Lord told him nothing of the facts of the gospel. He did not invite the man to believe or make a decision. He didn't reveal who He was. Instead Jesus just put up a wall in front of him. Strictly speaking, Jesus' answer was correct. If a person keeps the law all his life and never violates a single jot or tittle of it, he will have eternal life. But no one can (Rom. 3:23). And to suggest that the law is a means to life clouds the issue of faith. So why would Jesus tell him that? Because in spite of all the young man had going for him, he was completely lacking a sense of his own sinfulness.

His own desire for salvation was based on a felt need. He had anxiety and frustration. He wanted joy, love, peace, and hope. But that is not the right reason to come to Christ. It isn't wrong; it's just incomplete. Our Lord did not offer relief for the rich young ruler's felt need. It was imperative that he perceive his own sinfulness. Recognition of personal sin is a necessary element in understanding the truth of salvation. Jesus' answer took the focus off the young man's felt need and put it on God and His standard. **There is only One who is good . . . Keep the commandments.**

- The young ruler is not satisfied with the answer Jesus gives. Now he presses the issue. **“Which ones?” He asked Him.** Perhaps his question is truly genuine. Perhaps he is looking for an escape clause, a loophole, that will place only certain commandments before him as the essentials to obey for eternal life. Jesus responds by citing the second section or table of the Decalogue, found both in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Craig Blomberg notes that Jesus gives “the Fifth through Ninth Commandments in the order six, seven, eight, nine, five (cf. Exod. 20:12-16 and Deut. 5:16-20). He appends Lev. 19:18, the second half of his own twofold summary of the law, which he will present in 22:37-39. All of these commands focus on external and observable behavior that others can evaluate. The reader wonders if Jesus is setting the man up for the logic of the Sermon on the Mount, if he will teach again how no one can ever truly keep these commandments.”<sup>1</sup>
- In rapid-fire succession Jesus hits fast and hard with the law of God: **You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* in NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 297.

The rich young ruler asks, **Which ones?** The Lord responds by giving him the easier half of the ten commandments. Jesus preaches law to the rich young ruler. We have no business preaching grace until we have preached law. It is meaningless to expound on grace to someone who doesn't understand the implications of God's demand for righteousness. No one comprehends mercy if he doesn't know guilt. And you cannot preach a gospel of grace to someone who has not heard that God requires obedience. Jesus' words should have awakened a realization within the man that he had fallen short. But he missed it entirely.

- The young ruler responds by saying **I have kept all these**, and yet it is clear the still senses his own shortcoming and inadequacy to lay claim on eternal life. He asks, **What do I still lack?** We should not question the genuineness and sincerity of what the man says. From the age of 12 the young man had conducted his life according to the law of God. He had honored it and obeyed it. All of it! In a real sense what he said was probably true. Like the apostle Paul he was faultless (Phil. 3:6) with respect to the outward demands of the Law as taught by the religious teachers of Israel. From his *Bar Mitzvah* to this day, he had worked for God's approval by keeping His commands. However, he misses what God's standard and expectation is, and so Jesus now sets the record straight with crystal, clear clarity. There is no missing what He means. **If you want to be perfect . . . go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.** In words reminiscent of Matthew 5:48, Jesus now turns to the first table of the Decalogue and, in particular, the first commandment. The issue is what will be first, the God of your life. The Lord must be God in our lives, He must be preeminent. No one or no thing can stand between Him and

us. The particular demand Jesus puts before the rich young ruler is not a general command or condition for all persons. His wealth occupied the place that only God should have in his life. He may have obeyed, relatively speaking, those commands which address human relationships, but he lived in perpetual disobedience and sin when it came to the first and foundational commandments: *You shall have no other gods before me.* You come up short in your life in one crucial area. Jesus asks: what will be first in your life? The call to salvation and discipleship is a call to radical trust and commitment in Jesus. Jesus challenges the young man, as he challenged each one of us, to put away anything that is an obstacle to our following him. He could not love his wealth supremely and love Jesus supremely. One would of necessity rule out the other. This is a test of obedience. Jesus was saying, “Unless I am the number one priority in your life, there’s no salvation for you.” By placing Himself alongside the man’s money and demanding that he make a choice, our Lord revealed the true state of the young man’s heart.

Trans. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Well it is easier than you think. Just go to the right person, ask the right question, and get the right answer. But there is a paradox. You see, it is easier than you think, but . . .

II. It is harder than you think.            19:22-26

If receiving eternal life is easy, how can it be that it is also hard? Isn’t that something of a contradiction? No, it is not a contradiction, but it is one of those number of paradoxes of the Bible. To get you must give, to live you must die. The way up is down and the

first shall be last. Gaining, inheriting eternal life: it is both easy and hard. Why is it hard, you ask? Jesus gives us two reasons.

1) One thing can cost you salvation. 19:22

Verse 22 records the sorrowful and tragic end of Jesus' encounter with the rich, young ruler. **When the young man heard that command, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.** Gold would remain his god, not Jesus. Our Lord's difficult demand was met with a resounding "no." The priority of this man would remain his money and not the Master. He failed the test. He went away grieved. His possessions were more important to him than eternal life, and he couldn't come to Christ if it meant giving them up. This man was not ready to respond to the demands of suffering servanthood and radical devotion to Jesus. You see nothing, no thing can be allowed to stand between you and Jesus. As Paul reminds us in Colossians 1:18, He is "to have first place in everything." To put anything ahead of Jesus is nothing less than idolatry, to make that person or that thing your god. To put anything ahead of Jesus is the one thing that can cost you salvation.

2) Only God can provide you salvation. 19:23-26

The rich young ruler had come to the right person (Jesus). He had asked the right question: how do I inherit eternal life? He had received the right answer: make Jesus your God and follow Him like a little child. Sadly he did not answer correctly and he turned and walked away from the only true source of eternal life. This gave Jesus an open door to further instruct His disciples concerning entrance into the kingdom and the

demands of discipleship. **Jesus said to His disciples, I assure you: It is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.** Jesus was not condemning wealth and commending poverty. This is not a call for ascetic or monastic living. The point is simply this: wealth breeds self-sufficiency and confidence in one's self. Furthermore, it has an addictive quality. Time and again scripture addresses its dangerous attraction (see Matt. 6:19-21, 24; Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-30; 1 Tim. 6:17). If one is not careful it becomes life's priority and the things of God pass by the wayside. Jesus' statement no doubt stunned the disciples. They could not believe their ears! So to make sure they understand, Jesus said it again, but with greater force. **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.** Jesus in essence repeats himself but presses the case harder. The illustration of a camel going through the eye of a needle is an example of hyperbole or exaggeration to make the point. The camel was the largest animal found in that part of the world. The thought of trying to squeeze it, humps and all, through the eye of a needle would strike his disciples as funny, and also impossible. The disciples were even more amazed and asked, **Then who can be saved?** Judaism was guilty of a type of "prosperity theology." Wealth and riches were seen as an evidence of God's favor (see Job 1:10; 42:10; Ps. 128:1-2; Is. 3:10). Jesus corrected their bad theology. The possession or absence of wealth is no sign of God's favor. Indeed wealth can build a barrier to the one thing necessary to enter the kingdom of God: helpless childlike trust in Jesus and radical commitment to Him. In response to their question Jesus looked at them. No doubt all eyes were glued on Him and all ears were open to what he would say. His response is one of the great theological affirmations in The Bible, **With men this is impossible, but**

**with God all things are possible.** Gabriel said to Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). Jonah proclaimed “salvation comes from the Lord” (Jon. 2:9). Salvation is something man cannot accomplish. Left to himself he will never make it into God’s kingdom and he will never inherit eternal life. However, what man cannot do God can. Salvation is not through human achievement. It is, has always been, and will always be a divine accomplishment. It will always be the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). So now we see why inheriting eternal life can be hard, difficult, virtually impossible. One thing, just one thing, can cost you salvation. That one thing is any thing that stands between you and Jesus. Further, inheriting eternal life is not something a person can earn. You cannot work hard enough or do enough stuff. What you have in this life is no gauge or measurement of where you stand with respect of the life to come. Left on your own, you have no hope, you don’t stand a chance. Oh, but when God enters the picture everything changes. What is impossible with finite man is eminently possible with infinite God. Man cannot change his heart, but God can. Real life, eternal life, is found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ when we surrender our life to Him and His lordship.

Trans. Inheriting eternal life is easier than you think. Inheriting eternal life is harder than you think. Inheriting eternal life is better than you think.

III. It is better than you think.

19:27-30

Some people wrongly think that eternal life is simply going to heaven when you die and living forever in the presence of Jesus. It certainly does include both of those blessings, but there is much more than just this.

1) Leave a little and get a lot. 19:27-29

Peter, the ever-ready spokesman for the disciples proudly announces, **Look, we have left everything and followed you. So what will be there for us?** What follows is unique to Matthew's gospel, and is in keeping with the Jewish audience he is addressing. Jesus responds to Peter, not with a rebuke (which would have been justified!), but with a promise to him and the twelve. **I assure you: In the Messianic Age** (*NIV*, "renewal of all things," *NKJV*, "the regeneration"), **when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel.** The phrase "the regeneration" is the most literal, though Messianic Age captures the sense of the meaning as well. What is the Messianic Age? The Greek word is *palingenesia*, and it refers to the millennial kingdom (cf. Rev. 20:1-6). It is used in only one other place in the New Testament and that is in Titus 3:5. There the word refers to our new birth in Christ. Here Jesus is talking about the rebirth of the earth. That rebirth is a perfect parallel to our personal *palangenesia* when we are born again in Christ (John 3). Jesus is talking about the millennial kingdom, when He will sit on the earthly throne of His glory. Psalm 2:9 indicates that the Lord is going to rule the nations with a rod of iron. He is going to be the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16). He is coming to reign in glory and power. He is coming to rule the earth for a thousand years, and the saints will reign with Him (Rev. 20:4-6). The Old Testament saints (Dan. 7:18),

New Testament saints (1 Cor. 6:2), Tribulation saints (Rev. 20:4), and the apostles (Matt. 19:28) will all be there. All the redeemed of all the ages will reign with Christ when He sits on the throne of His glory. He will come in power and glory after the Tribulation (Matt. 24:29-30). He will then set up His kingdom of glory and rule for a thousand years. At that time the nation of Israel will be restored and the twelve apostles will rule and judge the tribes of Israel. In Acts 3:21 Peter calls the millennial kingdom the “times of restitution.” Matthew 12:32 calls it the age to come. According to the prophets, it is the time when truth will dominate, righteousness will flourish, peace will prevail, and joy will abound on the earth. The blessings of this time, however, that anticipate and foreshadow the eternal blessings of the new heaven, new earth and new Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22) are not just for the apostles. Jesus adds, **And everything who has left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children, or fields because of My name will receive 100 times more and will inherit eternal life.** Jesus teaches that whatever you might lose or give up **because of My Name**, you will not fail to receive **100 times more and eternal life.** The things Jesus notes we may have to give up are precious things: houses, brothers or sisters, or father or mother or children or fields. It costs to follow Jesus. However, the blessings far outweigh the losses. In God’s kingdom the benefits and blessings are simply too great to imagine.

2) Be last and come in first. 19:30

**But many who are first will be last, and the last first** is one of those sayings of Jesus that He repeated on numerous occasions. It shows up several times (cf. Matt. 20:16). We cannot be certain of its meaning and application. Is it a rebuke of the actions of the rich

young ruler? Of Peter's impulsive declaration? Does it actually fit better with the parable that follows in 20:1-16 (note that v. 16 repeats 19:30). With certainty we can say this: in Christ's kingdom there is a grand reversal of every earthly standard of position, rank and importance. God does not evaluate things in the same way fallen humanity does. As citizens of His kingdom, His children should think more like Him than the world (cf. Mark 10:42-45).

Conclusion. Salvation is easier than you think, harder than you think, and probably better than you think. But don't miss the sad and terrible lesson of the rich young ruler. Salvation is a blessed and free gift of God's omnipotent grace and boundless mercy, but He will not give it to a man or woman, boy or girl, whose heart puts other things ahead of Him. If you are not willing to turn away, walk away, from your sin, possessions, ambitions, false religions or self-centeredness, you cannot turn to Christ and be saved. Don't let anything stand in the way of your coming to the Saviour. In the end you will painfully learn, it was not worth it.