

Q. Why did Jesus tell the rich, young ruler to keep the commandments to be saved?

A. The question is based on Jesus' statement at the end of Matthew 19:17, where Jesus says, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Without an understanding of the context, this can certainly sound as if Jesus is saying that the man could have been saved by keeping the commandments. So, let's look at the surrounding verses more carefully. The dialog between Jesus and the rich, young ruler is found in Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, and Luke 18:18-23, with the subject continuing to be discussed in the verses that follow.

In Matthew 19:16-17a, we read, "And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God." This man was wondering how to gain eternal life, be saved, go to heaven. And he wanted to know what to do in order to get this.

Jesus immediately came back with a question that is really the beginning of the lesson Jesus wants to teach in His response to the man. He asks why the man called Him good, because no one is good except God. So, first, if Jesus is good, then He is God. Although the man may not have known it, this is true—Jesus is God. Second, what Jesus said means that no one else is good. Now, if this man were sharp, he would have seen that if no one is good, then he has asked the wrong question. He has asked what he can do to earn eternal life. But it should be obvious that the works performed by those who are not good will not be accepted by God and can never earn someone eternal life. Now, let's go on.

In Matthew 19:17b-19, we read, "But if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Jesus listed some of

the Ten Commandments. He listed these few to represent the law that God gave to the Jews through Moses.

Was Jesus suggesting that commandment keeping would save the man? Absolutely not. Jesus had just said that no man is good. If no one is good, then no one can perfectly keep the commandments; it is an effort doomed to failure. Jesus' statement is similar to Paul's in Galatians 3:12: "And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them." This might sound as if it is possible to keep the law and be justified. But in the next verse, Paul says, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law" (verse 13a). The law is a curse. It is not something we can keep. Romans 3:20 says, "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Performing the deeds of the law (such as keeping the Ten Commandments) will never justify you. The law cannot save you, and, if you are honest with yourself, it tells you the very thing you don't want to hear—you are a sinner.

Continuing, then, in the next verse in Matthew 19, in verse 20, we read, "The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?" The man's response to Jesus shows that even he himself, although he naïvely believed he had kept the commandments from his youth up, knew that he was not yet saved. As I said before, Jesus was trying to teach that the ruler's initial question about what he must do to get eternal life is the wrong question. So Jesus tells him to do something—keep the commandments. And the man says that he has kept the commandments but he is still not saved. So he recognizes that keeping the commandments is not the answer, but he still thinks there is something he must do.

But at this point, there is something that is particularly interesting. It is found only in Mark's account: "Then Jesus beholding him loved him" (Mark 10:21a). Many commentators pass this off as a mere glance of affection, but the evidence is against them. First of all, the context of the discussion is how this man can have eternal life. Second, Jesus is God. God does not extend His love in the context of eternal life to just anyone; God loves His elect (for more information, download the booklet, *Limited Atonement*, from this page http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg_010.htm). Third, the word "love" here is a form of *agapaō*. It is *phileō* that is more often translated as "affection." Even so, while *phileō* can sometimes refer to love, even the love of God, I know of no Scripture that uses *agapaō* to mean mere affection when used of what God has for a person. In other

words, I believe this Scripture is telling us that this man was the recipient of God's love for His elect. And, I believe that Mark says this at this point because the man said something that indicated his election. While he was still in a state of ignorance over the fact that salvation is entirely by grace, he did realize that, although he had thought that he had kept the commandments from his youth, he was still not saved. In short, he knew that keeping the commandments didn't save him, and that is more than most people know. The man was elect and had just taken the first baby step in understanding. It may not have occurred until sometime after Christ's resurrection, but I believe there is good reason to think this man was eventually saved.

Jesus, wanting to drive home His lesson, continues with things for the man to do: "Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Matthew 19:21). It is as if Jesus were saying, Okay, you think you have kept the law from your youth, so I'll add a few more things for you to try to obtain perfection on your own. Luke adds that Jesus said the man lacked one thing: "Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). Jesus tells him that he lacks one thing, but assigns him three things to do: sell everything he has, give it to the poor, and follow Him. The three things are not the one thing the man was lacking. But the man's reaction to these things reveals what it is that the man lacked. "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:22). Luke says, "And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich" (Luke 18:23). What vital thing did this man lack?

Jesus was telling this man to give up everything he had, give it to the poor, and follow Him. For the man to have done this, he would have had to have complete trust in Jesus. That is what Jesus meant when He said the man lacked one thing. The one thing the ruler lacked was trust in Jesus. The one thing that would have made the man truly perfect, because his perfection would have been the imputed righteousness of Jesus, was saving faith. In English translations of the Bible, the words "trust," "belief," and "faith" are all translations of the same Greek word, *pistis*. Sometimes, we may be vague about what faith is, but when we understand that it is the same thing as belief and trust, then we have a better idea.

Why did this man lack trust or faith? Two reasons. First, he was being natural—depending on himself, what he could do. This is the way most people are. It's human nature. We don't want to humble ourselves before God and admit that we can't do anything to save ourselves. Second, God had not yet given him the gift of faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Faith is the gift of God. And this is the lesson that Jesus goes on to teach in the verses that follow.

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?" (Matthew 19:23-25). Like most Jews at the time, Jesus' disciples were under the mistaken notion that being saved was a matter of doing good works, and since rich people could afford more acts of charity, they were in the best position to be saved. Thus, Jesus' statement about how hard it is for rich people to be saved astounded them. Jesus, of course, expected this response and had the answer: "But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."

Sometimes people wonder what Jesus meant by a camel going through the eye of a needle. Simply, He meant exactly what He said. He gave an illustration of something that is normally impossible. This is exactly as impossible as it is for a rich man (or, frankly, any man trusting in anything other than Jesus) to be saved. But with God, it is possible. So, the rich man was trusting in his ability to do something to save himself. He lacked faith in Jesus. Because of his lack of faith, he could not be saved and went away sorrowful. But Jesus said that with God all things are possible. Do you see, then, that this must mean that God can supply the one thing that is naturally lacking for a person to be saved? In other words, faith comes from God. And, as I said, I believe that God did eventually grant faith to this rich, young ruler.

So, was Jesus really telling the rich, young ruler to keep the commandments to be saved? No, not at all. Jesus was getting him to begin to think, to realize that all of his commandment keeping had not saved him, that he was too weak and carnal to give up his riches and follow Jesus, and that he lacked one thing—the gift of saving faith that would enable him to put his trust in Jesus Christ alone as His Savior.

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Galatians 2:16

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