

Matthew 19:16-22

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-19/matthew-1916-22/>

A devout young man who had great influence and wealth remarkably runs to Jesus and asks what else he can do to enter into eternal life. Jesus loves and admires his zeal and tells him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, and follow Him. But the man departs sad because he loved his tremendous earthly treasures more than the kingdom.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-25.

As *Jesus* was departing from the area called Judea beyond the Jordan (Matthew 19:1, Mark 10:17) on the way to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32) *someone came to Him* with an earnest question.

This *someone* was a *young man* who *owned much property*. Luke said *he* was a ruler and was extremely rich (Luke 18:18, 23). As a ruler *he* was *someone* of authority and influence. He was also moral and *kept the commandments*. This rich, *young ruler* was likely known for his piety. Not many rich, influential people were drawn to *Jesus*, but this *man* was. And, unlike Nicodemus who sought *Jesus* in the secret of night (John 3:1-2), this *man* was unafraid to show his admiration and great respect for *Jesus* in public.

Mark described the rich, *young ruler's* enthusiasm and humility. He “ran up to *Him* and knelt before *Him*” (Mark 10:17). The sight of *someone* important running after *Jesus* would likely have caused a scene. Jewish men did not run. Running was seen as a sign of indignity or a loss of self-respect. And when *he* caught up to *Jesus*, *he* knelt before *Him*, displaying for all to see that *Jesus* was greater than himself.

This pious *young man* recognized and addressed *Jesus* as a person of great moral authority. *He* addressed *Jesus* as “*Good teacher*” (Mark 10:17, Luke 18:18). The Greek word for *teacher* is “*Didaskalos*.” “*Didaskalos*” is the Greek term used for the Hebrew term, “*Rabbi*” (John 1:38). Rabbis were revered in Jewish culture. *Rabbi* was a title of honor. Rabbis were experts in the law and prophets. They taught how God’s commandments should be applied.

The rich, humble, moral, influential, and *young ruler* was boldly, earnestly, and literally running after *Jesus*. And *he* did so because *he* believed *Jesus* would give *him* the answer to a most important question.

His remarkable behavior, heart, and faith in *Jesus* indicate that this *man* either believed that *Jesus* was or at least hopefully expected that *He* might be the Messiah.

His question was “*what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?*” Mark and Luke are more specific than Matthew about what *he* asked *Jesus*. They wrote “*what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Mark 10:17, Luke 18:18).

To *obtain* something means to acquire or gain it. *Obtain* is a general term. Something can be obtained any number of ways. It could be bought, it could be discovered or found, it could be earned, given, built, inherited, etc. To inherit something is a specific way a thing may be obtained. To inherit means to *obtain* or receive something from your family or a benefactor. An inheritance is something that is passed down to a person. It is something that rightfully belongs to a person, but the transfer and possession of it may not have yet occurred. An inheritance is obtained at a designated time or when certain conditions are met.

The man was asking Jesus, "what are the conditions that I need to meet in order to obtain my inheritance of eternal life?"

But what did the rich, *young ruler* mean by *eternal life*? Did *he* mean "go to heaven and live forever?" Or did *he* mean "enter the kingdom?" The meaning of *eternal life* in his question is a critical term to understand.

Some say that the *young ruler* was *asking* how to get to and live forever in heaven. The Bible teaches that people receive the gift of *eternal life* through faith in *Jesus*. It also says that our *good works* have nothing to do with receiving this gift.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

And *Jesus* told Nicodemus that the gift of *eternal life* is a matter of believing in *Him* as the Son of God. *He* told Nicodemus all that was needed to gain the gift of *eternal life* was to have sufficient faith to look at *Jesus* upon the cross, hoping to be delivered from the venomous poison of sin (John 3:14-16).

The gift of *eternal life* is a matter of pure grace and simple faith. However, *eternal life* is also a reward, something that can be inherited. This is made clear in Romans 2, where Paul says that at the judgement, God will "render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing *good* seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life" (Romans 2:6-7).

We can see in this verse that *eternal life* is a reward for doing *good*, and for seeking to please God, seeking honor, glory, and immortality from Him rather than from the world.

When we consider how *Jesus* understood and answered this believing man's question, we see that it is based on faithfulness, a reward for doing *good*, rather than on saving faith. *Jesus* answered *him*, *if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments*. If *Jesus* was telling *him* *what he* needed to *do* to live forever in heaven, then His response would contradict what *He* told Nicodemus in John 3:14-16, which was to simply believe in Him.

What is far more likely is that *Jesus* was answering about *what this man* needed to *do* to *enter* the kingdom, and receive its blessings.

Given the context of the kingdom-focus of Matthew's Gospel; and taking into account who this rich, *young*, pious, believing *man* was; and understanding the answer *Jesus* gave to this *man*'s question; and considering what *Jesus* and His disciples discussed about this exchange afterward (Matthew 19:23-26), there can be little doubt about what this *man* was *asking Jesus*. *He was asking what he needed to do to enter the kingdom.*

One of Matthew's main themes is identifying *Jesus* to the Jews as the Messiah, the king, who had a kingdom which could be entered through acts of faith. *Jesus* is emphasized in Matthew as:

- the prophesied lawgiver (Deuteronomy 18:15-19)
- and king (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

Jesus's ministry as described by Matthew proclaimed the kingdom (Matthew 4:17). The goal *Jesus* those who believe in Him is for them to enter that kingdom through faithful living. It is in this way they can receive the kingdom's blessings.

Jesus's teachings were about the kingdom (Matthew 5-7; 8:10-12; 10:5-42; 12:25; 13:52; 16:24-28; 17:25-27; 18:3-4; 19:12; 19:14; 20:20-28; 26:29).

Jesus's parables almost exclusively depict something within the kingdom (Matthew 13:19; 13:24; 13:31; 13:33; 13:44; 13:45; 13:47; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1; 25:14).

And *Jesus*'s main exhortations from "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33) to the "Great Commission" (Matthew 28:18-20) are issued with the kingdom in mind. We enter the kingdom by seeking the kingdom. We seek the kingdom by obeying the Great Commission.

Within the context of Matthew, to *obtain eternal life* is synonymous with the terms:

- the "Makarios" blessings of the Beatitudes, that attend living with godly perspectives (Matthew 5:3-11)
- being rewarded by your Father in heaven for giving and praying as unto Him (Matthew 6:4, 6:6,)
- to *enter* through the narrow gate and way by following God's commands, rather than taking the world's path of least resistance (Matthew 7:13-14)
- recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as a reward for living by faith (Matthew 8:11)
- being confessed by *Jesus* before His Father in heaven as a reward for confessing *Jesus* before men (Matthew 10:32)
- find *life* as a reward for losing it for *Jesus*'s sake (Matthew 10:39, 16:25)
- *enter* the kingdom (Matthew 18:3, 19:24)
- *enter into life* by keeping God's commandments (Matthew 19:17)
- be saved (in this case, being delivered from missing the best blessings of the kingdom) (Matthew 19:25)
- celebrating with the king (Matthew 22:10) and the bridegroom at the wedding feast (Matthew 25:10);
- *enter* in to the joy of your master, after being a faithful servant (Matthew 25:21, 25:23).

Notice how four of these exhortations begin with the word: *enter*. Notice also that the term, *enter into life* (Matthew 19:17) is the exact expression that *Jesus* used to answer this *man*. And notice once more how ‘enter the kingdom’ (Matthew 19:24) and ‘be saved’ (Matthew 19:25) are terms used by *Jesus* and His disciples when *He* described what the rich, *young* ruler missed when *he went away*. In this case, “saved” refers to being delivered from losing the greatest reward of *life*.

Jesus makes clear that the way to *enter into life* to its fullest is to *enter* the kingdom; that is the way to gain the greatest blessings that can be gotten in this life. Following *Jesus*, walking in His ways is the means by which we *enter* the kingdom.

Jesus prefaced His response to the rich, *young*, ruler with another question and comment. *Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good*. Mark and Luke say “*Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone*” (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19).

God is the only One who is good. *Jesus*’s rhetoric is a challenge and invitation to this influential and god-fearing ruler. It is a challenge and invitation to this devout *young man*, who possibly already believed that *Jesus* was the Messiah, to go even further in His faith and to confess that *Jesus* was also God.

Jesus was a *good moral teacher*. In the two millennia since *He* ascended into heaven, many have considered His moral teachings to love even our enemies from the heart, to be the most sublime system of ethics the world has ever seen. But *Jesus* was far more than a *good moral teacher*. And *Jesus* does not allow this *man* to stop at calling *Him* merely *good*. If *he* is going to *call Him good*, *he* must also *call Him* God. There is no middle ground. If we are going to speak about *what is good*, we should be aware and be ready to acknowledge that we are speaking of the things of God.

Then Jesus told *him* what *he* must do to obtain and inherit *eternal life* in God’s kingdom. *If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments*. It is important to note here that *Jesus* equates the phrase *obtain eternal life* with the phrase *enter into life*. This again underscores that the topic here is not how to gain the gift of *eternal life* through being born again, but rather how to *enter into life*, meaning to gain the greatest blessings available in *life*, which is what the young ruler clearly desires. *Jesus* clearly states that the way to gain the most from *life* is to live according to God’s commands. God knows what is best for us. His commands are given for our best interest. So if we follow God’s commands, then we gain the very best out of *life* that is possible.

We know from the interactions *Jesus* had with the Pharisees that they had covered Israel up with commands (Matthew 23:4, 23). To which the *young man* replied, *which ones?*

Some say that *this man* was being unscrupulous and trying to find a loop hole. This does not seem likely, since *Jesus* does not seem to think so. *Jesus* normally calls out hypocrisy. Instead, here *He* gives an honest answer to an honest and most earnest question. *Jesus* specifically told *him* the *commandments* that *he* must *keep*:

You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.

These were the fifth through ninth *commandments* of the ten given through Moses (Exodus 20:13-16; Deuteronomy 5:17-20). All of them had to do with how to treat other people. Jesus summed these *commandments* up with what *He* would later identify as “the second greatest commandment” and *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39).

The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept since I was a boy; what am I still lacking?” (Mark 10:20; Luke 18:21).

This too was a truthful answer. *Jesus* accepted *his* honest and frank response. *He* did not challenge or ignore it as *He* often did with those who were doubtful (Matthew 11:4-6; Mark 9:23), deceitful (John 4:16-18), or hypocritically pretentious (Matthew 9:4; 16:4; 21:24-25; 22:18; Luke 23:9; John 6:26; John 7:33; John 8:19).

Instead, *Jesus* knew this *young man* was sincere.

He knew how *he* strove to *keep the commandments* *Jesus* had just mentioned to the best of his abilities. *He* saw that *he* was on the cusp of fulfilling his divine destiny and obtaining his divine inheritance. *He* was almost *complete* and ready to *enter* the kingdom. *He* really had *kept the commandments* and was now asking *Jesus* what else he could do to *obtain eternal life*.

Mark said that when *Jesus* heard this *man’s* answer, *He* looked *him* in the eye and “felt a love for *him*” (Mark 10:21). This *man* truly was remarkable. *He* had exhibited the kind of zeal and devotion that *Jesus* sought. And *he* had expressed enthusiastic interest in following *Jesus*. But the *young man* had expressed to *Jesus* that he still felt he was *still lacking*. He had an innate sense that there was more to *life* than what he was experiencing. So, given that hunger, and earnest desire expressed by the *young man*, *Jesus* gave him a straight answer.

Jesus prefaced His answer “*One thing you lack* (Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). Matthew wrote that *He* said, *if you wish to be complete*. The Greek term for *complete* is “*teleios*.” It means “perfect” or “fulfilled.” “*Teleios*” carries a sense of accomplishment or achieving a goal or purpose. It is the same word *Jesus* used in the Sermon on the Mount when *He* said “be perfect.”

“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
(Matthew 5:48)

This is challenging, since it means that *Jesus’s* answer applies to anyone who has the clarity to ask, “How can I get the absolute most that is available to me in this *life*?”

The rich *young ruler* was moral, and wealthy, but *he* humbly knew *he* was still lacking. Otherwise, *he* would not have come to *Jesus* to ask this question. *Jesus* was completely willing for *him to be complete*, and told *him* *If you really wish to be complete*, here’s *what good thing you can do: Go and sell all your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow Me*. *Jesus’s* answer is to shift the *young man’s* investment time frame from this *life* to the next. From gaining treasure on earth to *treasure in heaven*. As always, this is paradoxical. The way to gain the most in this *life* is to give up all in this *life* in preparation for the next.

If *the young man* would have just said “Ok, then I am *good*” *Jesus* might have said, “Great to have met you, glad you’re on a good path.” But the rich *young ruler* is asking *Jesus* how to get the very most out of *life*. *Jesus* knew that as devout as this *young man* was, that *he* had one obstacle in his way in order to gain the most he could possibly gain out of *life*. This *man* was rich in earthly *treasure* that would soon vanish. *Jesus* was telling *him* how to use it to store up *treasure in heaven* (Matthew 6:19-20).

What exactly did *Jesus* mean by *go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor*? It seems in this case, *Jesus* meant literally *sell* everything *and give it to the poor* and become *poor* himself. There was an opportunity at hand to become a disciple of Christ on earth. Perhaps *he* would have become one of the primary disciples, even possibly taking the place of Judas. *Jesus* will soon die, and His disciples scatter. Possessions and other responsibilities will be a hindrance to spreading the gospel across the world.

Jesus was literally *asking* this *man* to *sell* everything. It is important to note that *Jesus* did not say “Sell all you have and give it to My ministry.” Was it intended as a universal command for everyone else to do literally *sell* all their *possessions and give to the poor*? Clearly not. Otherwise, all of Christian society would be in a constant cycle of deeding away *property* like it was a game of hot-potato. Such obedience would foster chaos and disorder rather than harmony and human flourishing. It would go against the Creation mandate of being fruitful and faithful stewards with the dominions God gave to men and women (Genesis 1:28).

However, *Jesus*’s admonition to the *young ruler* does have a literal application to all believers.

In advising *him to sell and give his property*, *Jesus* is inviting *him* to give his heart fully to the kingdom (Matthew 6:21). *He* is inviting *him* to lose his “*psuche*” (life) for His sake so that *he* may find it in Christ (Matthew 16:25). *He* is inviting *him* to *enter into eternal life* by the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13). This passage invites each believer to “deed over” all they possess to God, for Him to use as He sees fit. It is an invitation to live *life* as a steward of all we possess, stewarding it for the kingdom of God. Sometimes that might include giving all, or a great portion. God has given us all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17). But money is a harsh master, and if we serve it, it leads to loss of joy. That is why Paul instructed those who were wealthy to be generous (1 Timothy 6:18).

Jesus is telling us to count our earthly possessions as lost to us, and consider all we possess as resources of the kingdom. This is part of the attitude that will lead any of us to *obtain eternal life*, or *enter into life* in the kingdom, meaning “gain the most that is available from living in this *life*.” This of course takes great faith. We must believe that the rewards we gain from laying up *treasure in heaven* will greatly exceed the rewards we can lavish upon ourselves through money in this life. But, it turns out that the primary opportunity we can gain from this life is to learn to know God, and others, by faith. That is a precious opportunity we will only get in this life. In the next we will know God by sight (Revelation 21:22-23). Knowing God by faith is such an amazing opportunity that the angels are watching the church in order to learn more about God themselves (Ephesians 3:10).

What will it profit you, rich young ruler, to hold onto your treasures and lose your life (“pusche”) and inheritance of eternal life in the kingdom? (Matthew 16:26). Each of us can apply this principle by “deeding over” to God what is already His, and live life as a steward. Everything we own is passing through our hands. The only thing we can take with us is that which we send ahead.

Jesus gave the young man great investment advice, to lay up treasure in heaven. All of us can do likewise.

Matthew wrote, *But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.* God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). If we desire to reap a great harvest, it requires we sow generosity in this life (Galatians 6:7). If we live life as a steward, we can live without fear of loss, for we have already recognized that everything belongs to God. If we cling to the things in this *life*, we will miss great blessings and rewards, even as the rich young ruler did.

The *thing Jesus told him to do* greatly saddened *him*. And this remarkable *young man* walked *away* from the fullest blessings of the kingdom because his heart was encumbered with earthly *treasure*. *He* could not leave all he had and *follow Jesus*, because *he* was *owned by his property*. And *he followed* his heart’s master (Matthew 6:24). As close as *he* was to entering *into* the fullest and complete experience of *eternal life*, the rich *young ruler* took the wide gate and the broad road that day (Matthew 7:13). It seems likely that the *young ruler* gained a partial reward, rather than a full reward. John warns his disciples about this in his second epistle:

“Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.”
(2 John 1:8)

Biblical Text

¹⁶ And someone 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 Then 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 will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” ²² But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.