

“Don’t Take My Word for It”
 Sermon for 8 January 2023
 Texts: Matt. 19:16-30

So do you know what it takes **to inherit eternal life**? That is the presenting concern of the rich young ruler. One answer would be “Search the deed. Are you a listed beneficiary? Are you even listed in the registry?” You must be named as a beneficiary in order to be an heir. Your name must be entered in the book of life or you do not inherit life. The analogy of a guest book at an inn is apt. If you have pre-registered, before you have signed in, then you have secured a place. You offer some form of identification, or, perhaps, in former days, a letter of introduction and your registration proceeds. Now if it is heaven that we are picturing here, the check in procedure is appropriate. But the clerk won’t be asking when you plan to be checking out. Your place is your place, it will not be filled by someone coming afterwards. So the rich young ruler’s presenting concern is this: **Good teacher, what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?**

Note the presuppositions here: 1. That there is eternal life; 2. that he thinks it is **something good** that he must do to obtain it; and 3. that Jesus is good. We are not certain as to whether this is simply an honorable salutation, for if it registers a sincere belief that Jesus is good. **Why do you call me good?** Are you asking indirectly about my divinity? We get that from Jesus’ response: **Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.** Jesus puts **eternal life** into an envelope entitled “**life**”. This leaves open a number of things such as life now, life in its fullness, and eternal life all as one. Furthermore, Jesus expands the meaning of a **good thing** to encompass many things; namely the commandments. . . all of them. *And that, we are led by Scripture to conclude, is humanly impossible. Only Jesus has kept all and every one of the commandments of God completely, entirely!* When we assert that Jesus is sinless, we are also asserting that he was perfectly obedient in all matters of the law! **That limiting qualification, therefore, is important.** It is not humanly possible, but definitely possible with God’s help. And that is why the young man’s claim, **All these things I have kept from my youth** (v. 20) is laudatory and credible. In the main that is, for the most part, this young man is disciplined and exceptionally moral—he has a lot going for him! And Jesus, knowing all this, proceeds to challenge him to reach for the next level: **love your neighbor** (particularly the poor neighbors all about you) by *ministering out of your wealth to their needs*.

Here’s what’s happened so far. The young man asks a singular question, Jesus expands it to include all God’s commandments. Jesus never questions, or qualifies

the young man's testimony. He lets it stand. And Jesus reduces **eternal life** to simply **life**, in both its present and future applications. After these exchanges, Jesus adds a new twist. What if your **what good thing must I do** question is better parsed: **if you want to be perfect?** What if moral perfection is the heart ambition of this remarkable young man. I thin it is safe to assume that he is exceptional in this regard. We treat perfectionism as if it is a psychological disorder, a complex, or a problem. Certainly this is not a biblical view of either our hope, or of God's expectation!! In fact the Bible teaches thus:

Matt. 5:48

Jesus preaching: **"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Genesis

17:1

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

Leviticus

11:44

For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy; neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

Leviticus

19:2

Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.

Amplified

Bible helpfully renders this:

You,

therefore, will be perfect [growing into spiritual maturity both in mind and character, actively integrating godly values into your daily life], **as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Now is this demand true? Is this demand scripturally sound, or simply a cringeworthy assertion of an impassioned apostle? Are we willing to set aside our psychology, and set aside our dismal record of moral failure, or, our shots at perfection, and humbly admit *that God expects perfection*, and that, because He is willing to assist us towards that end, perfection is neither impossible, nor even unreasonable.

It is actually more a matter of trust and submission that it is clarity and effort.

Is this the word of God? Or is it merely my "opinion" of the scripture? *If this is merely my opinion it is, frankly, worthless and you and I should both be utterly convinced of that.* There is nothing that I am so convinced of as this: my standing in this pulpit and preaching is essentially "probationary." I am, as it were, on pre-trial probation. And some of what I preach precipitates both fear and distrust. I sense that. I am aware of that and that is a constant. Pray for me, for us!

We should hit the pause button now, friends, and take stock. My authority is the word of God. I find it wholly and entirely trustworthy. Therefore, insofar as I align with Scripture, I am authoritative, yes, as well as truthful and trustworthy. There is nothing to be afraid of if I am preaching the word of God. Further, if anyone listening to me, does not trust the Scripture—that is, view it as authentic, verifiable, true and trustworthy then there is a huge spiritual dilemma. We have one standard of truth, the revealed word of God . . . and the Holy Spirit teaches us, interprets the word to us authentically, truthfully and reliably. You should not trust in me. *I do not even trust in me.* I trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Spirit and in the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are as true as God Himself. ***It is His truth that I am called to pass on to you; not my truth.*** It is His words and not my words. I do my best not to distort the truth, not to edit the tapes, not to proof-text or to make the Scriptures say anything that *they are not plainly saying*. It must be evident in the text, or at least potentially so—or must remain unspoken.

We have the same standard and we both have access to that standard—it never varies. You should search the scriptures for yourself, and see if these things indeed be so!

Most sermons could benefit from more study and prayer. Where I cannot be certain, I strive to be careful and deferential to God and godly writing—my elders and betters. The word defends itself both aptly and ably. I am only its messenger; salvation in His Name is ever the message. I have never yet preached the perfect sermon—but I am working on that.

Again, don't trust in me, trust in the word of God—like Jesus, it never fails!

Back to Matthew 19. Did anyone ask about being perfect? Well, not exactly, and not directly. You have to decide if Jesus' insight is warranted. Was the rich young ruler really earnest about being perfect? Or was he merely seeking to know the one way to obtain eternal life? Or, and this is often the case, was a mixture of both? I believe that Jesus had a habit of answering the real question and that is why some of His sayings are so oblique—they don't line up directly with the inquiry. But Jesus did answer the question: ***If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me.*** Jesus brought the ceiling down around his head because His answer united the present with the eternal—the giving to the poor with the following of the master. We might say this was an exchange of nothing for something. Right? What is our stuff compared to *walking with Jesus and treasure in heaven BOTH*. The “there and then” encapsulated in the “here and now.” There's a truth worth the price of entry.

But the young man . . . went sorrowfully away. This is his reaction. I have mistakenly thought that this verse registers Jesus' disappointment (which may, or may not have been there). After all it is recorded that **Jesus loved this young man.** When you are invested in so much, in possessions and properties. It is easy to get distracted and to miss out on the better life. The "good life" rarely measures up to "the better life," believe me.

The way to eternal life is faith. We are to believe in Jesus as our Savior, and we are to receive forgiveness of our sins through His atonement. Then we are made righteous and can stand before God as His ransomed children, free and fulfilled at last.

Amen