

WHAT IS REQUIRED?

Matthew 19:16-26

How can we know for sure we will spend eternity in heaven? How can I know that I am saved? Those are different questions than asking “what can we do to be saved?” The first two questions are about evidence and the third is about the method of achieving such a salvation. What can happen if we disregard this difference?

Without making a clear distinction between evidence and means, then we might be tempted to think that creating the evidence is tantamount to achieving the condition that would produce the evidence. If I were to buy a bushel of apples and tie them on a Japanese maple tree, then that does not transform the maple tree into an apple tree. It simply makes it a maple tree with apples. Are the apples good? Absolutely! That would be good fruit and it could benefit those who would see the tree to admire it and especially those who would eat the apples. Billy Sunday had a memorable saying with the same idea: “Going into a church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car.”

This subject may be the most misunderstood concept among Christians today and maybe we don’t even need to say “today.” If you listen closely to many sermons that are being preached from many pulpits, there is a definite undertone that we should be obedient to God’s word so that we can enjoy the Lord’s blessings. While the association of obedience and blessing is truth, the motivation for obedience needs to be based on the first four of the Ten Commandments which is our relationship with God – or as Jesus expressed it so well in chapter fourteen of John, “if you love Me you will keep my commandments.”

We can appreciate the fact that when Jesus was dealing with the Jews during His earthly ministry, they were oriented toward the physical realm and focused on the relational ideas that we recognize as distinctly “Old Testament.” So the conversations that He had with people usually had Jesus expressing “spiritual truths” and those that heard Him interpreting His message through a “physically oriented mind set.” We will see some of this “communication problem” as we examine Jesus’ interaction with a person that we typically identify as the “rich young ruler.”

Standard Defined – 19:16-20

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?” Matthew 19:16-20 (NASB95)

If we have a task that needs to be done that may have a lot of different aspects, then it is good to have some sort of guide to help us get it done. One of the more complex and convoluted things that we may need to do is to file our tax returns. Sometimes we may be convinced that we need to find an expert to do it for us. If we do it ourselves, then we will need a set of instructions to guide us. (The complete tax guide is hundreds of pages long.) For those who use a computer tax program, the guide is interactive and you fill in the blanks and the program goes through the preset steps and produces your tax return. We essentially have a step-by-step process that produces a desired, needed result.

Wouldn’t it be great to have a fill-in-the-blanks program for our lives that would guarantee us that we will have eternal life and go to heaven when this physical life is over? This is essentially what this person we refer to as the “rich young ruler” was looking for when he

asked Jesus “what good thing must I do to have eternal life?” To his credit, he was familiar with the teachings of Moses and the laws and traditions and he realized that these teachings were about “good” things that people need to be doing or “bad” things they should be avoiding.

As was the typical practice of Jesus, He answered the question with a question. This is an excellent teaching technique that can challenge people to become engaged in a discussion beyond a superficial level. Jesus was essentially challenging the man to think about what he already knew. Many times if we will simply think about what we are asking, we will know the answer to our own questions. The problem is that we don’t like the answers.

Jesus could have said, “You already know the answer to the question, so why are you asking Me?” Where does the standard for what is good come from? Since God is the standard for “goodness,” then “how good do we need to be if we want to be living in the same eternal realm as God lives?” The obvious answer is that we must be as “good as God is.” Compare that to “be holy as I am holy.” What would be evidence of such goodness? All the commandments are kept.

The question of religion is always, “What good work must I do to obtain a certain reward?” This is “merit badge” religion. It is religion by “degrees.” It is attempting to achieve “higher levels.” All such strivings are man-made ideas.

Since the Jews had about as many commandments and rules as the Internal Revenue Service has about taxes, the young man may have thought that some rules were more essential than others. “Which commandments” may have been a question about the need to keep all the commandments of the Pharisees. As we examine the answer Jesus gave, we see that He omitted the first four and the tenth commandments. The five commandments that Jesus mentioned essentially tell us to “do not harm others.” These He then summarized in a statement that describes the spirit of these laws.

It is probably reasonable to say that most people who want to “do the right thing” and believe that “character counts” and believe in “fairness” would say that they abide by these five rules and the summary statement. It is not unusual to hear a statement that agrees with this when an upstanding and moral person is asked if he or she is saved. The answer will be something such as “I try to do the right thing and be good to others. Some may even add that they go to church and give to help the poor, etc.”

It would appear to some that Jesus was telling the young man that he could possess the “life that has no beginning and no ending” by keeping the commandments. However, if we will carefully read what Jesus said He did NOT say “possess” but He did say that the way to “begin” or to start was by keeping the commandments. For most people keeping the commandments would require a change in the way they do things. Such a change is expressed in religious terms as “repentance.”

What happens when we change the direction in our life and start keeping the “rules?” We quickly discover that, in spite of our best efforts, that we fail. This is what Paul was writing about in Romans 3:20 where he stated “for by the Law is the knowledge of sin.” In other words, if we had not already realized that we have sinned, we discover that truth when we attempt to keep all the commandments.

The young man believed that he was doing all the specific things that Jesus mentioned and yet he realized that something was still missing since he apparently lacked the assurance that he possessed eternal life. If we are honest with ourselves, then we eventually realize that we cannot keep the commandments. That realization should lead us to search for what needs to be done to “fix” the problem.

Impossible to Keep – 19:21-22

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. Matthew 19:21-22 (NASB95)

Jesus did not challenge what he said about his keeping the five commandments that Jesus had mentioned. Instead, He went to the heart of the matter. The man was ensnared by materialism that grew out of covetousness. It may be plausible to state the converse: He was materialistic and that caused his covetousness.

Jesus also did not make any mention of the first four commandments to the man. We may take these insights and conclude that the basic problem was that the man had put the god of materialism above God and He was, in fact, violating the first four commandments while being a moral person. He knew that he lacked something but he was not capable of defining what it was.

He was not willing to give up his dedication to the phony god of materialism for the True and Living God for this would have been something so radical that it would undermine his whole way of life and leave everything at God’s disposal. Jesus did not require all his followers to be destitute. (The call is to abandon everything on which we depend – other gods.) Jesus showed that in the kingdom of heaven there was no room for misplaced priorities or disobedience. Humble submission to the Father’s will was a necessity. That is exactly the way Jesus lived His life. Jesus had stated this as “I do nothing on My own, I do only the will of My Father.”

Notice the question that led to the answer Jesus gave. “What am I still lacking?” That missing thing was a right relationship with God that recognizes Him as the only priority and everything else is subject to Him (He is Lord) and that He has the only “character that really counts.” These are what the “omitted commandments” are all about. The pursuit of fame, fortune and control (power) can take over a person’s life as the motivating and driving forces which can become that person’s god. What Jesus essentially told the young man was that he needed to abandon the false gods that he was worshiping and let Jehovah actually be God in his life.

External conformity alone has never been pleasing to God; a contrite heart has always pleased him. The point of these two verses was to probe into and identify the objects of the young man’s inner commitment. He failed the test of true commitment to God because he was materialistically minded. Jesus told him to give away his riches, or the idols that stood as a stumbling block between him and true righteousness. Jesus had recently told His followers that if anything would cause them to stumble and miss out on eternal life, then it must be ruthlessly removed.

Provision to Accept – 19:23-26

²³ And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ “Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard *this*, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁶ And looking at *them* Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Matthew 19:23-26 (NASB95)

The idea that *the eye of the needle* was the name of a narrow gate in the city wall has no historical foundation. Apparently, Jesus was painting a picture that defined “impossible” in a way that the people would not misunderstand.

People used to believe that being materially successful was evidence of God’s blessings. They based this on the promises God gave Israel at the beginning of their history as we see in such passages as Deuteronomy 28. God *did* promise material blessings if they obeyed, and

material losses if they disobeyed. If riches are a sign of God's favor and if it is difficult for a rich person to be saved, then who can be saved?

The answer is tied into being able to distinguish between visible evidence and the spiritual condition and motivation of a person. The highest kind of obedience is not based on a desire for reward or the fear of punishment. It is motivated by love. In His life and His teaching, Jesus tried to show the people that inner spiritual blessings are far more important than material gains. God sees the heart, and God wants to build character. Salvation is the gift of God in response to man's faith.

We tend to trust that which our physical senses detect or that which is mentally discerned since we have lived by these things for so long. The natural man cannot comprehend the things of the Spirit and, therefore, trusting in spiritual things is exceedingly difficult. If we have a sense of security in the natural realm (by having material wealth, for example), then we are not likely to look for any other security. Our lack of security in anything other than God has to be revealed to us. Apparently, we cannot "figure it out" on our own. That is a step that is impossible. Once the truth is seen, then all physical things can be put into their proper perspective and all brought under the Lordship of Christ.

Another thing that turns out to be impossible is to "fix" what is wrong with us. When we discover there is no "good thing" we can do to make us suitable to possess the "God-kind of life," then we are faced with having to ruthlessly remove or get rid of whatever is the stumbling block. What do we need to get rid of? It turns out that the problem is who we are as descendants of Adam. There is no fix for that condition.

What do we do when we have a piece of equipment that is not repairable? We replace it with something that works. This is exactly what Jesus was talking about in His conversation with Nicodemus. You must be born again – not of the flesh but of the Spirit. That is impossible with man, but it is clearly possible with God.