

Priorities – Matthew 19:16-22

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Wouldn't It Be Awesome?*

1. Have you heard Michael Eisner, Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts, Shaquille O'Neal, & Bill Gates have become Christians?
 2. They were all attending a pre-screening of the new movie by Mel Gibson – *"The Passion of the Christ"* and were so deeply moved they stayed to talk with Greg Laurie afterward.
 3. As he shared the gospel with them, they all indicated they wanted to receive Christ & made professions of faith.
 4. Isn't that awesome? Think of the impact these people will have on their peers and their spheres of influence!
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5. Okay, I have to let you in on a little secret – I made that up; it didn't happen.
 6. We could wish it would; we could hope & pray for such a thing.
 7. We occasionally get news of some notable person who receives Christ and we get all excited because we think, "What an impact they'll have!"

B. *The Set Up*

1. This is very likely what the disciples were thinking as they watched the scene unfold we find in our text today.
2. A *potentially* awesome convert came to Jesus one day . . .

II. TEXT

A. V. 16

16 Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

1. As in a few of the other passages we've looked at recently, both Mark & Luke add some interesting details to this story.
 - a. Luke tells us that this man was a *ruler* among the Jews.
 - 1) he was either one of the main leaders of the synagogue or a judge.
 - 2) whatever position he held as a ruler, he was a man of significant influence!
 - b. as the story unfolds, we learn he was quite *wealthy* as well.
 - 1) in v. 22, Matthew says he had *many possessions*
 - 2) Luke says he was *incredibly* wealthy;
 - 3) this was a man who wasn't just well-off, from the upper middle-class of Jewish society – he was *fabulously rich*!
 - c. then, to cap it off, v. 20 tells us he was *young*.
 - 1) the word refers to someone between 25 & 40; he was no youth, some upstart teenager;
 - 2) he was a successful young man who'd made a name for himself and a mark on his time.
 - 3) he was a success story – the kind of young guy today's TV studios

would pick as the next “*The Bachelor*.”

2. But despite all his accomplishments; all the position, possessions, & power, he sense he *lacked* something.
 - a. that elusive inner hunger that had driven him to this point had not been satisfied by all he'd managed to assemble.
 - b. he thought he saw in Jesus what it was he was looking for.
 - c. so he came & Mark tells us he knelt before Jesus in a posture of humility.
 3. He said, “**Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?**”
 - a. his *concern* is the right one – he wants to make sure he's gained the most important possession of all – eternal life.
 - b. but as we'll soon see, his conception of what eternal life is & how it's attained was far from accurate.
 4. In Jesus, he saw someone Who was confident in His possession of eternal life.
 5. So he went knelt before Him & made his request. He said,
 - a. “It's clear You're an excellent teacher and have discovered the secret to what's truly good.”
 - b. “Tell me, if You will, *what good thing* should I *do* so I *too* can possess what You do?”
 6. Take careful note of the young man's question.
 - a. he didn't ask *how* he could attain eternal life, but *what thing he could DO* to attain it.
 - b. he thought he knew *how* eternal life was gained; by *doing* something notable.
 - c. he thought there was some secret that would earn him salvation.
 7. To him, Jesus was nothing more than a *teacher*; one Who asked, answered, & entered what he himself aspired to.
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8. Now, step back for a moment from Matthew's narrative & put yourself in the position of one of the disciples.
 - a. you're walking along the road to the next village where Jesus will teach, when this man approaches the group.
 - b. it's obvious from his clothes he's quite well off.
 - c. as he comes before Jesus & kneels down the locals who are gathered round whisper his name – he's well-know; a ruler & one of the richest men in the nation.
 9. As a disciple, you get quite excited! Why? For several reasons:
 - a. 1st – you're in the southern region of Judea now and the opposition to Jesus on the part of the national leaders in the capital of Jerusalem has become official & intense. Having a friend in high places would be a key asset.
 - b. 2nd – finances have been tight; so tight in fact that when it came time to pay the temple tax in ch. 17, which was only a couple day's wages, Peter had to go fishing again.
 - c. 3rd – as a person of influence, this man could open a whole new realm of Jewish society to Jesus' ministry!
 10. To the disciples, this rich young ruler would be a *prize*.
 11. His question commended him as a man who was concerned about spiritual

things.

12. You can almost feel the disciples' excitement & see them rubbing their hands together in anticipation. // But Jesus sees things very differently than they do.

B. V. 17

17 So [Jesus] said to him, "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."

1. Jesus doesn't look at this man's *potential* as a convert – He looks *at the man*; He gazes at his *heart* and He sees something there that must be dealt with.
2. He goes about it in that mysterious way He does with all of our hearts – by bringing us face to face with our misunderstandings & the lies the world has taught us.
3. The man had addressed Jesus as 'Good teacher.'
 - a. Jesus begins by focusing on that one word – *good!*
 - b. He wants to make sure the man realizes there is only One Author & Source of that which is good – God!
 - c. Jesus is not some *new way*, an *alternative* route to success.
 - d. if the RYR has thought there was some *different way* to eternal life than the way God had already proscribed, he was sadly mistaken.
 - e. the route God has given *is & always has been* the same – His Word!
 - f. if this guy wanted to know what he had to **DO** to attain eternal life, then the route is the same as it had always been – **KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS!**
4. His next words reveal further the error in his thinking regarding salvation.

C. Vs. 18-19

18 He said to Him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, "You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 19 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

1. To the young man's question of what he could *do* to earn eternal life, Jesus gave a simple answer – **"Keep the commandments!"**
2. If this man wanted to approach God on the basis of his own works, then the path had already been laid – obedience to the law.
3. By asking *what* law & *which* commands -- his *heart* is being exposed.
 - a. he thought he could pick & choose among the commandments.
 - b. he surmised some were more important than others.
 - c. he thought there was a special set of God's laws, that when obeyed merited eternal life.
4. The RYR's response in v. 18 helps us see what was really in his heart.
 - a. if his idea of eternal life had been an intimate love relationship with God for eternity, then he would have understood the commands, not as stepping stones to heaven,
 - b. but the loving guidelines of a Good God who wants the best for His people.
 - c. the problem is, this was not at all the RYR's idea of eternal life!

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5. Let me ask you – what is eternal life?
- a. for many, eternal life is little more than an exalted form of this life.
 - 1) eternal pleasure & the absence of sorrow & pain.
 - 2) many think of heaven as little more than an eternal playground.
 - 3) others think of eternal life as living in heaven forever, but they have no idea what heaven is going to be like.
 - 4) their chief hope and desire, is not to go to heaven so much as it's to avoid hell! They may not be all that enthused about heaven but they at least know they don't want to end up in hell.
 - 5) so salvation, gaining eternal life, is rather like fire insurance.
 - b. that's where the RYR was – that was his conception of eternal life.
 - c. but that is not what the Bible means by eternal life.
 - 1) in John 17:3, Jesus said “**This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.**”
 - 2) the essence of eternal life is an unending, unhindered intimate experience of God.
 - 3) heaven is heaven, not because it's consummate pleasure & the absence of pain – heaven is heaven because it is the immediate, full presence of A Good & Loving God.
 - 4) the pleasure, glory, and blessedness of heaven **IS** God.
 - d. but the RYR thought eternal life was a thing to attain in & of itself!
 - 1) a prize to be won through effort,
 - 2) a reward handed out to those who proved themselves good enough to earn it.
 - e. for the RYR, eternal life in heaven, was not about *enjoying God*, and so being blessed, but just blessedness itself without reference to God.
 - 1) he thought of eternal life as just a more pleasurable form of *this* life!
 - 2) he wanted to make sure that just as he'd been a success in *this world*, in *this life*,
 - 3) he'd made plans & preparation for the *next* life & would enjoy the best it had to offer.
 - f. but intimacy with God, which is the essence of *real eternal life* didn't really factor into his thinking or desires.
5. Jesus was concerned to show this young man his conception of eternal life was faulty; both what it is & how to attain it.
6. To his request for *which* commands he should keep, Jesus replies by quoting the 2nd table of the 10 Commandments – the ones that speak of our duty to other human beings.

D. V. 20

20 The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”

- 1. This claim may sound arrogant & presumptuous but judged from the way Jesus *replies* to it, the young man was being sincere.
- 2. All his life he'd attempted to be a good guy, fair & kind to others.
- 3. While not perfect, he lived by a strict morality that governed all he did.

4. In fact, that's what he was; a **moralist**! A man who lived **carefully**, treating all with justice & kindness.
5. Jesus doesn't laugh in his face or call him a hypocrite & name off the times he'd blown it.
6. He accepts what the man says at face value because He has a far more important & telling test to apply.
7. You see, while this man can't be faulted for his **morality**, his **spirituality** leaves much to be desired.
8. The RYR was a man who'd been led astray by the doctrine of the Pharisees who put all the emphasis on external morality & rigid rule-keeping.
 - a. they believed they merited eternal life as a reward for how carefully they'd kept the law.
 - b. but there was a raging debate among them over which laws were most important and which earned them the greatest brownie points with God.
9. The RYR saw in Jesus someone who could settle this issue & tell him if there was anything he'd left undone that needed doing to ensure he won the prize.

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10. Okay, we need to take a little side trip in our study tonight/today.
 11. We often say that there is only one way to God, one way to heaven, one way to eternal life & salvation.
 12. That's not quite right – there are two ways, and Jesus names one of them here – Keep the commandments, and you can have eternal life.
 - a. if you could perfectly obey the entire law of God, not just the letter, but the spirit of the law, from birth to death, then you would gain eternal life.
 - b. but here's the problem, not a single soul who's ever lived, except Jesus Christ, **can** do that. And the reason why is because of the Fall.
 - c. you see, you and I were IN Adam when he sinned. When he fell, we fell IN him!
 - d. that fallenness is destined to express itself in each & every one of us thru personal sin.
 13. So the avenue to eternal life via works is closed. No one will get to heaven by that route.
 14. God gave the commandments, not as road signs guiding us to eternal life, but as warning signs saying, "Look, see how you've blown it!"

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15. The RYR had swallowed the error of the Pharisees who were seeking to gain heaven by their own works.
 16. Jesus wanted to show him that the law was never intended by God to be a pathway of merit & earning points that would add up to salvation.
 17. So He proves this was the way the man was thinking by listing all these commandments – to which the guy says, "Been there, done that! Bought the shirt. What else?"
 18. Now Jesus makes it clear the RYR has missed it altogether . . .

E. Vs. 21-22

21 Jesus said to him, **"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.” ²² **But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.**

1. The 2nd table of the law He'd given in vs. 18 & 19 is based on the 1st table, which Jesus summarizes here.
2. The first 4 commandments detail our duty to God, and the very first commandment says, **“You shall have no other gods before me.”**
 - a. “There must be nothing that takes a higher place in your heart than Me.”
 - b. “I must be your highest priority & greatest treasure.”
3. If Jesus had simply quoted the first 4 commandments as He did the others, this young man might easily just have waved his hand & said, “I’ve always done those too.”
 - a. “After all, I’m a Jew – and we serve only One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob.”
 - b. but Jesus didn’t just quote the commandments that define our duty to God, He **APPLIED** them *specifically* to this man’s situation.
 - c. Jesus knew God was *not first in this man’s heart*, and spoke directly to the issue.
4. He said, “If you want to be complete, lacking nothing, then get up from kneeling before Me, immediately liquidate your holdings, give the selling price to the poor, and instead of counting your treasure in earthly possessions and wealth, start counting your treasure in spiritual terms.”
 - a. “Once you’ve done that,” Jesus said, **“then** you’ll be able to follow Me. And following **ME**, trusting *in* Me **IS** the way of salvation.”
 - b. “Eternal life is not just some kind of exalted earthly success & pleasure.”
 - c. “The essence of eternal life is knowing & loving God, and it doesn’t begin after you die; it begins the moment you begin following **ME!!!!**”
5. Jesus is **NOT** saying here that the way to merit eternal life is by selling all your earthly possessions & giving to the poor.
6. He was bringing *this man* face to face with the issue of *his heart* – he didn’t want God, he just wanted the promise of an *eternal status quo*.
 - a. just as he’d been successful in *this life*, he was making plans to ensure *that same success* carried over into eternity.
 - b. again, he wasn’t interested in God, but only in heaven as a kind of eternal playground.
7. The proof of this is that he went away *sorrowful*. The reason? He had a lot of stuff!
 - a. his idea of success, his value system lay in earthly wealth.
 - b. his god was *not* the Lord of heaven - his god was made of gold.
8. This RYR thought he’d kept the commandments, and Jesus showed him he failed at *the very first one!*
9. If we do not own the Lord God as our God, if there is **ANYTHING** else that defines our lives and to which we’ve given our hearts, if our treasure is not in heaven and the God who dwells there, then all the rest of our good works count for nothing!

III. CONCLUSION

A. *God Wants Our Heart*

1. Jesus' words to the RYR struck home & laid bare his heart.
2. Outwardly he was a good guy, a moralist who thought that eternal life was something you earned by being a good person.
3. But the eternal life he envisioned was not an eternal love relationship with God; it was just an exalted form of what he'd had on earth.
4. If he'd had a heart after God, then as soon as Jesus showed him his wealth had placed an undue pull on him, he'd have taken immediate action to remove that influence.
5. Friends, God doesn't want our good deeds; He wants our hearts! And anything that pulls our hearts away from God must be dealt with! **Radically!**
6. That's what Jesus said in 18:8-9 -
 - 8 **"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.**
 - a. as we saw last Wednesday, Jesus is not calling for literal amputation –
 - b. He's using hyperbole to get across the **urgency** of our being **radical** in the way we deal with any & everything that would get in the way of living a life of total dedication, not to religion, not to being a good person, but to the Lord.
7. Jesus was holding out to this precious man the offer of eternal life, but he got up & walked away.
8. He left Jesus, but you can be sure Jesus' words did not leave him.
9. The gospels end his story at this point – What happened to him? We don't know.
10. His fate is uncertain – and I think that's precisely the way the Holy Spirit intended it – for while **his** fate is uncertain, God doesn't want a single person here today to be left in a place of uncertainty.

B. *Look At Your Heart*

1. Take a good, clear-headed look at your heart tonight/today.
2. Where's your treasure? Is it in heaven? Is God the prize you yearn for more than anything?
3. Is your idea of eternal life unhindered, uninterrupted, fellowship with God?
4. Or is heaven **just** an exalted form of Disneyland.
5. Is there any love, any attraction, any desire that competes with your love for & devotion to Jesus?
 - a. any weight that pulls you earthward rather than toward heaven?
 - b. single people - does your desire for a husband or wife move you to compromise your walk?
 - c. young people - does your desire to be thought of as cool among your peers

at work or school cause you to stumble?

d. like the RYR, has the God-given longing to be successful been corrupted from the purity of a heart given wholly to God into a heart given to piling up earthly treasures & accomplishments?

6. Psalm 139:23-24

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my [thoughts]; **24** And see if *there is any* wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.