

Matthew 19:16-30 | “Who Then Can Be Saved?”  
*Preached on February 11, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to Matthew 19, and we will be verses 16-30. *[pauseee]*

It's interesting how throughout history there have been myths and legends about a fountain of youth or an elixir of life that will give you immortality. *[pause]*

There's also the idea called 'cryonics' where in theory some people think that you can freeze someone and then unfreeze them later and they will come back to life, but that has never once worked. *[pause]*

There's also multiple articles and news stories asking people who live over 100 years old what their secret to long life is. *[pauseee]*

The truth is that deep down pretty much everyone wants to live forever, and they know that this life cannot be all that there is. *[pauseee]*

One tech mogul, Bryan Johnson, believes that he has figured out the basics of immortality, spending millions of dollars to do so.

He has gone so far as to infuse his teenage son's blood plasma into himself every month.<sup>1</sup>  
*[pause]*

His thinking is that through scientific experiments and facts he can discover the way to live forever.

He even wants to be the best in history at not dying, and proudly wears a shirt that says on the front, "Don't die." *[pauseee]*

In a recent podcast interview, he was asked, "Do you believe that there's a possibility that you won't die?"

And he responded by saying, "Yes. Unquestionably."<sup>2</sup> *[pauseee]*

While Bryan Johnson's life is an extreme example of someone looking to live forever, he is reflective of humanity's longing to not die.

And like Bryan Johnson, humanity often looks in all the wrong places that will only end in failure to bring about that longed for immortality. *[pauseee]*

In our passage this morning, we find another young man who was looking for eternal life.

He is also younger and rich like Bryan Johnson, and his mind works the same sort of way, thinking, "What can I *do* to have eternal life?"

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.foxnews.com/media/immortality-seeking-tech-mogul-new-gen-zero-humanity-transcend-human-norm>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roHeUk7ApUo>.

And how Jesus responds to him will show us the truth that eternal life is not found through science, good works, tips and tricks, or any such thing.

I'll READ the passage for you. [*READ 16-30*]

Here comes this young rich man to find out from Jesus what good deed he could do to have eternal life.

It's almost like he thinks that he can find some secret good deed to do that would immediately cause him to gain immortality.

*And this man shows us that...*

### **I. We often think that we can do enough to merit eternal life.**

Anyone in here love checklists? [*pause*]

Think about why many of us love our checklists.

It's because everything that we need to do is all laid out on the paper and it feels more doable. [*pause*]

We don't feel as overwhelmed anymore because it's all there on 1 sheet of paper.

And then when we start finishing things, we check those things off the list, and we feel a sense of accomplishment. [*pauseeee*]

A checklist makes us feel capable and proud of what we can *do*.

Well when it comes to righteousness and eternal life, we often want a checklist for that, too.

We are like the young rich man, asking, "OK Jesus, tell me what I need to do to get eternal life and I'll just do those things."

And that just reminds us that the natural disposition of sinners is works-righteousness. [*pauseeee*]

We think that we have the ability to merit God's favor.

We think that if we can have a list of things to do, we can check each off and be good to go. [*pauseeee*]

But why is it that we are prone to this kind of thinking? [*pause*]

We are prone to do this because it makes it feel like it's something *in our power to do*. [*pause*]

We love to be in control, and we want to be in control of our eternal state.

We think, "Just give me what to do and I will work at it." [*pause*]

We want to feel like *we* had a part to play in our possession of eternal life. *[pause]*

In our pride, we want to sit back and think, “I did that.”

We love that sense of accomplishment and how it makes us feel.

We want to look and say, “I earned that! I worked hard. Look at what I did.”

We want to feel like we actually deserve eternal life. *[pauseeee]*

There’s something about dependence and receiving something undeserved that hits at our pride.

But this is the opposite of what Jesus calls us to...

A couple verses before this, Jesus told us that the kingdom belongs to such people as children, who show dependence on Christ and go to Him for blessing. *[pause]*

Is that the mindset of this man?

He’s going to Jesus - but not to receive, but to find what he can do to merit eternal life.

He’s saying, “What can I *do*?”

That’s not dependence, that’s independence. *[pauseee]*

Now what are the “good deeds” that people think will gain them eternal life today?

Some people think that if only they attend church every once in a while, then they will be good to go with God. *[pause]*

For some, as long as they go every once in a while, they feel like they have checked their box, and are in a good state with God.

And if they haven’t gone in a while, they feel guilty, but then once they go a couple times, they feel satisfied: “OK, I’m good to go now.” *[pause]*

Why do you think there are so many people who you only see on Christmas and Easter? *[pauseeee]*

But the truth is, it’s not only them who have a problem with this, is it?

What about you? *[pause]*

You may come to church every week or come most weeks, but what’s the motivation?

Is it to feel like you are now in the good graces of God?

Is it to feel like by going you are securing your eternal life?

Works-righteousness is a subtle danger for each of us because it masquerades as a good thing, but it's dangerous for the soul. *[pauseee]*

Another big one is baptism.

For some as long as they were baptized as a baby or go to a confession, they feel good to go -- they think they are covered. *[pause]*

For others, it's being baptized as a kid or as an adult, but the same kind of thinking is behind it. *[pause]*

I've seen people come out of the woodwork, show a desire to be baptized, get baptized, and then you never see them again.

Did they think that it was just something to check off of a list of things to do and that's it? *[pauseee]*

What else is there?

Some people think that as long as they are just a kind, generous person then God will notice that and reward them with salvation.

Others see giving money to church as their key thing to do to be good with God...

They consider, "If I just drop some money in the offering plate, I'll be in God's good favor." *[pauseee]*

Don't you see what's going on?

By acting that way, we are acting just like this young rich man, thinking, "What can I *do* to have eternal life?"

We think that we just need a list that we can check off. *[pauseee]*

Do you have a list in your mind?

Do you think that you can gain God's favor or do something to merit salvation or eternal life?

If so, then you are acting just like this young man. *[pauseee]*

You see, one of the things about this man and about us (if we think this way), is we have a higher view of our goodness than we ought. *[pause]*

Did you notice what this man said in response to Jesus telling him some of the ten commandments he should do?

He boldly said, "All these I have kept." *[pause]*

He's saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've done all those. I'm good. I've checked those off my list. Go on to what else I need to do." *[pause]*

Talk about pride and self-righteousness!

You're telling me that he always honored his parents and always perfectly loved his neighbor?

Something sounds off, doesn't it?

But this is what we are like in our sinfulness: we have a higher view of our goodness than we ought. *[pauseeee]*

Notice how Jesus responds to his desire for a good deed when he says, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good." *[pause]*

He's saying, "Good? God is only good."

You think you can measure up to Him?

You think you can find goodness outside of what He has commanded?

God, the only one who is truly good, is the standard for goodness. *[pauseeee]*

It's almost like this man is looking for some good deed outside of what God has said so that it would be like God would have to give him eternal life because he's so good.

No, no. Jesus points Him back to the Word of God as the standard for goodness. *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes we can be just like this man, thinking so highly of ourselves.

We think, "Look at me. I've never murdered, committed adultery, stolen, lied, or dishonored my parents."

But here's the thing: amidst all of the self-deluding reveling in our self-righteousness, we still know deep down it's not enough to meet God's standard. *[pause]*

Notice how the man says, "What do I still lack?"

He knows deep down that he hasn't done enough.

He knows deep down that he's still missing something.

And let me tell you, if you are relying upon your own works to save you and give you favor with God, you will *always* know deep down that it's not enough. *[pause]*

Something in you is going to keep repeating, "It's not enough, it's not enough, it's not enough."

And the reason is because no one can be as good as God, who is the standard of goodness.

No sinner can be perfectly holy as God, and perfectly do His Law.

We all “fall short of the glory of God”.<sup>3</sup>

This is why this man, even though he thinks he has kept the Law, still doesn't feel at ease because he knows there's still something missing. *[pause]*

And this is how self-righteous people are: though they have a good-looking shell, they are in inner turmoil inside. *[pauseee]*

Surprisingly, when you look at what Jesus does, He doesn't give relief to this man, but He actually lifts the bar higher.

He has built up this man's self-confidence, so that the man is thinking, “Yes, yes, I've kept those requirements.”

But Jesus is about to topple this man's self-righteous tower in one fell swoop. *[pause]*

Jesus lifts the bar up higher for this man when He says, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

And what's the man's response?

Verse 22, “When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” *[pauseee]*

Why would Jesus do that?

Why lift the bar higher when this guy is saying that he has kept all of those other commandments?

To utterly reveal this man's self-righteousness and to show that he could not merit eternal life on his own. *[pause]*

*You see...though we often think that we can do enough to merit eternal life...*

## **II. Jesus shows us that we can never reach that standard.**

When I was younger, maybe in 7th or 8th grade, I thought I was big stuff as a basketball player. *[pause]*

I had a higher view of skills than I ought to have had.

So I self-confidently went up against junior and senior basketball players, and I was quickly humbled.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:23.

They were so much better than me. *[pause]*

Well likewise, this man came into the conversation with such great self-confidence, thinking that he could attain eternal life and walked away saddened. *[pauseeee]*

What Jesus does is He magnificently peels back the onion of this man's life to display for all to see the true nature of his heart.

Though this man could pretend to think that he had obeyed the Law, Jesus showed that he did not truly love God nor his neighbors, but his riches. *[pause]*

Jesus chiseled down through the self-righteousness and the pride, opened his chest, and pulled out an idol, the idol of money. *[pauseeee]*

This is what the Word of God does to our hearts.

We can try to put up walls and barriers.

We may try to put up decorations that make our lives look better than they are.

We can try to act like we are so righteous in front of others...

...But God is a master heart surgeon, who opens us up with the scalpel of his Word to discern "the thoughts and intentions of the heart."<sup>4</sup> *[pauseeee]*

You cannot fool the Lord.

You may be able to fool others and cover the state of your heart, but Christ knows. *[pause]*

This man thought that he could persuade Jesus into thinking that he had kept the Law, but Jesus pinpoints the man's failing.

And no amount of make-up will cover up your heart in the sight of God.

He knows white-washed tombs when he sees them.<sup>5</sup> *[pauseeee]*

If you pridefully say, "I've kept all of God's commandments," He knows the truth. *[pause]*

He uses His Word to unveil our hearts, and for the prideful and self-righteous, they need to hear how they are not enough.

This is one of the purposes of the Law: to show us our sinfulness.<sup>6</sup> *[pauseeee]*

No one can merit eternal life - that's what Jesus is showing us here.

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<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 4:12.

<sup>5</sup> A reference to Matthew 23:27-28.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 7:7.

This man thought he could, and acted like he did all of these amazing good works, but Jesus showed that he couldn't even simply sell his stuff and follow Jesus. *[pauseeee]*

If you think that there's enough good works you can do to merit eternal life, Jesus will confront you with your failings, and show that you do not measure up to God's Law.

You may be able to say, "I've kept those," but Jesus will just keep pulling out more and say, "Really? What about this one?" *[pauseeee]*

**This man's idol was riches.**

He couldn't give up his money and possessions, it was too dear to him. *[pause]*

**Do you realize what this man was essentially saying by walking away?**

He was saying, "Eternal life isn't worth giving up my stuff for." *[pause]*

**Isn't that tragic!**

He basically chose to live for the here and now and die eternally without God because he cared too much about *his stuff*.

**He would rather gain the whole world and lose his soul<sup>7</sup> than to let go of it all, follow Christ, and receive eternal life and joy in Him.**

And there are countless people in this world, maybe even in this room, who would rather perish trying to clutch onto their things than to turn to Christ. *[pauseeee]*

**Jesus uses this moment to show us the danger of riches.**

And for some of you, you may think, "Danger of money? How is money bad at all? Money is good! I want more!"

Yet listen to what Jesus says in verse 24, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." *[pauseeee]*

So often we think that wealth equals good and blessing, but Jesus shows us that in some ways wealth can be detrimental to your soul. *[pause]*

**The love of riches can actually hinder people from salvation.**

Why?

**Because wealth can lead to self-sufficiency.**

It leads someone to think, "Why do I need Christ? I've got all I need." *[pause]*

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<sup>7</sup> A reference to Matthew 16:26.



It leads someone to pursue and cling to their assets rather than follow Christ with their all.  
*[pauseeee]*

This man loved riches more than following Christ, and many people do the same.

So many are pursuing more and more money to have that new house, new car, new thing, but this has become their life and Christ is pushed out. *[pause]*

So many are sitting on a nestegg of money, possess thousands in their retirement account, and feel secure.

They think, “OK, I’m secure if something happens,” but they have not found their eternal security in Christ. *[pauseeee]*

If you put your trust in your money and possessions, where is trust in God going to be?

You are on dangerous ground!

Let go of your grip on your possessions, and cling to Christ, instead.

You can depend on Him and trust Him. *[pause]*

That’s what Jesus was calling this man to: to let go of his riches and live in dependence on Christ. *[pause]*

The call was to abandon self-sufficiency and trust Christ alone, and that’s the call for each of us.

Will we be like children and depend on Christ to care for us, or will we try to go out on our own and trust ourselves and our works? *[pauseeee]*

What self-sufficiency in your heart is hindering you from trusting Jesus? *[pause]*

Are you trusting in your bank account number to keep you secure?

Are you trusting in your good works to merit your eternal life?

Turn away from and discard that thinking.

Dispose of all of that thinking and follow Jesus! *[pause]*

He is worth following with our lives, as Jesus makes clear to Peter and his disciples at the end of the chapter -- that it is worth it.

You may have to give up some things, but the end result is receiving more. *[pauseeee]*

You can depend on Him, though you have nothing of your own to bring, and He will provide.

This is exactly how we receive eternal life. *[pause]*

We recognize that we are sinners and that our righteousness does not measure up to God's standard. *[pause]*

We are like that young rich man, God shows us that we do not measure up to the standard of meriting eternal life -- none of us does.

We understand that we bring nothing to the table to merit salvation.

Not one of our good works is good enough or aids us in gaining eternal life, but our only hope is Christ's righteousness and work alone.

It's Him and His righteousness that allows us to receive eternal life. *[pause]*

He perfectly kept the commandments of God and died for our sins, taking our place, and then rising again.

And now if only we would turn in faith and trust in Him, we are saved and promised eternal life.

As the hymn "Rock of Ages" says so well, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." *[pauseeee]*

The disciples are shocked by what Jesus says about this rich man because back then riches were thought of a sign of God's blessing.

So this is why they say, "Who then can be saved?" *[pause]*

If the ones like this man, who do so many good works can't make it, then who?

If the ones who seem so blessed by God with riches can't make it, then who?

*And Jesus shows us that...*

### **III. Our only hope is the powerful working of God!**

He says, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." *[pauseeeee]*

Notice what Jesus says, "With man this is *impossible*." *[pause]*

Get that deep in your mind.

It is absolutely, completely, utterly, totally impossible to save yourself.

No amount of good works will merit salvation. *[pause]*

You cannot work your way to Heaven.

You cannot *do* enough.

There is not some checklist of works that you can check off and be good with God. *[pause]*

The young rich man thought that he could just find something to do to merit eternal life, but he fell short, like every sinner. *[pause]*

Though we often think that we can do enough to merit eternal life, Jesus shows us that we can never reach that standard.

You are not the exception, but “with man it is impossible”.

**So our only hope is the powerful working of God, who turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh!**<sup>8</sup>  
*[pause]*

He must work in our hearts to soften them to repent and turn in faith to Jesus Christ.

He must do the work of providing righteousness through Christ, for our righteousness is as filthy rags.<sup>9</sup> *[pauseeee]*

Salvation is a divine act, not a human achievement.

God must miraculously do the impossible of causing us who were dead in our sins to be made alive in Him.<sup>10</sup> *[pauseeee]*

*The story of the young rich man shows us such an important truth...*

**We cannot gain eternal life by our works, but we receive it by grace.**

This story started out with a man wondering what good works he could do to have eternal life, and he was left feeling incapable.

**So also, there’s nothing we can do to gain eternal life by our works.** *[pause]*

Our good works don’t measure up, and our hearts are laid bare by God’s Law, showing our lack of love for God and neighbor. *[pause]*

**So where’s our hope? Christ alone.** *[pauseeee]*

Some of you have been trusting in your good works to save you, or even to go along with God’s grace to add to your salvation.

*This is impossible; it does not work that way.* *[pause]*

Your church attendance, baptism, Lord’s Supper partaking, kindness to others, and service can in no way merit eternal life.

**Your only hope is Jesus and His righteousness.**

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<sup>8</sup> A reference to Ezekiel 36:26.

<sup>9</sup> A reference to Isaiah 64:6.

<sup>10</sup> A reference to Ephesians 2:5.

So turn from your self-sufficiency and trust in Jesus alone and what He did on the Cross as the way to be saved. *[pause]*

And for those who have eternal life through Christ because of His grace, never forget it.

You received eternal life through grace, so why are you trusting your own effort now?<sup>11</sup>

Look to Christ and follow Him.

He can be trusted and followed with our lives, and it's totally worth it all.

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<sup>11</sup> This is similar to Galatians 3:3.