

Proposition: In the episode of Luke 18:18-30, we discover a very unusual invitation. As we listen, we will hear two matters which reveal the gospel that Jesus preached.

- I. We hear the candidate's question (18).
 - A. He is respectful.
 - B. He is spiritual.
 - C. He is teachable.
- II. We hear the Lord's answer (19-30).
 - A. Jesus gave an inquiry (19).
 1. We must grasp the truth about Jesus.
 2. We must grasp the truth about ourselves.
 - B. Jesus gave instructions (20-21).
 1. He pointed the man to God's Law (20).
 2. The man pointed to himself (21).
 - C. Jesus gave an invitation (22).
 1. Sell everything and give to the poor.
 2. Start living in light of eternity.
 3. Come and follow Me.
 - D. Jesus gave the implications (23-30).
 1. We must follow Jesus on His terms, not ours (23).
 2. It's hard for rich people to be saved (24-25).
 3. No one can be saved apart from God (26-27).
 4. We must receive eternal life, for we can't earn it (28-30).

Concluding Question: Am I truly a follower of Jesus?

What would you think of an evangelist who made it hard for people to get saved? There was an evangelist one time who in the midst of his travels encountered an influential leader. The young fellow had a great deal of money as well as power, but also was interested in spiritual things, so much so that he asked the evangelist, "What should I do so I can go to heaven?"

Quite a ripe opportunity, wouldn't you say? In a world full of people who don't seem to have much interest in spiritual things, here's a guy wanting to know how to get to heaven!

The answer he received from the evangelist was quite shocking. The traveling evangelist pointed him to the ten commandments which the candidate said he'd kept since childhood. Next, he told him liquidate his estate and give it to people who were living in welfare conditions.

When the young leader heard what the evangelist told him to do, he hung his head and walked away. And the evangelist let him go.

What do think of that evangelist? A man came to him wanting to "get saved" and he let that man get away. Would you want that preacher to come and have meetings here? You say, "What's the name of that evangelist? Have I ever heard of him?" Oh yes, you've heard of him. His name is Jesus.

What kind of message would Jesus preach if He came to this church? Specifically, what kind of invitation would He give if someone said they wanted to know what to do to go to heaven? I think we'd be surprised.

What I'm about to say next may sound like an exaggeration, but I don't believe it is. In fact, the statement comes from a burdened heart.

It's my observation that the "gospel" that is preached in many evangelical, fundamental churches today is very different from the gospel that Jesus preached. The

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difference is not petty, nor semantic, but enormous. I am convinced that church pews are full of people who have heard and responded to a *deficient gospel*, and who are thus clinging to a *false assurance*.

You may be skeptical of such a bold assertion. That's okay, for if it's merely my opinion it matters little anyway. But, what if it's true? What if the gospel message that is being promoted today in churches and evangelistic rallies and crusades *is* different from the gospel Jesus preached? The implications are eternal.

There's only one way to address this crucial issue properly, and that's to take a close examination of the gospel Jesus preached. You decide whether we're being offered a deficient gospel.

This morning, I want to take you to the scene I just described, the conversation between the evangelist, Jesus, and the rich young ruler. It's recorded in Luke 18:18-30.

I must warn you. We're about to see the gospel that Jesus preached. It may shock you. It may cause you to reevaluate your status with God. It may force you to rethink the way you present the gospel to others.

But, on the other hand, if we take it seriously, we can leave this place today knowing for certain that we have eternal life. What's more, we'll leave knowing how to help others experience the same.

So let's take a look at the gospel that Jesus preached. The episode recorded in Luke 18 involves two scenes.

I. We hear the candidate's question (18).

The context is important. The conversation we're about to examine came on the heels of two significant events for Jesus. In the first, recorded in verses 9-14, Jesus told a parable because He had confronted people who "were confident of their own righteousness" (9). Don't miss that, for the man in our story fits that mold.

Then, in verses 15-17, Jesus blessed some children and taught that, contrary to the self-sufficient notions of many, the kingdom of God belongs to those who receive it like a child.

Next we see our man. Verse 18 states, "A certain ruler asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" What a question!—how to have eternal life. And what a candidate for the kingdom!—a ruler.

We learn three things about this individual from the text. First...

A. He is respectful. He addresses Jesus with respect, "Good Teacher" (or, "Good Master," in the KJV). His name is not given. His status is. Verse 23 says he's rich. Verse 18 says he's a ruler. Matthew's account reveals he's young (19:20).

Apparently, he was a Jewish religious leader, possibly a ruler of the synagogue. There he is, a respectful man who had everything. He's devout, young, wealthy, highly respected, and influential. Not a bad catch for the kingdom!

B. He is spiritual. What's his request? He wants to know about eternal life. He's not a materialist (at least not on the surface). He feels a need in his life. He wants to be right with God. He wants to make sure he will not miss out on God's gift of eternal life.

The parallel account of Mark 10:17 says he came running, and in fact, knelt before Jesus. And unlike Nicodemus, who came by night, this reputable man approached Jesus openly, in broad daylight. For a man of his position to ask such a question took great courage.

C. He is teachable. "What shall I do?" he asks. He wants to know. He's sincere. He's a respectful, spiritual (I use the term with caution), and teachable candidate for the gospel. Or is he?

In His answer, Jesus shows that the man was indeed *not* ready. We see a hint of his problem in the way he phrased his question. "What must *I do* to inherit eternal life?" What's the man's view of salvation? He thinks he can *do* something to earn it. He believes he can achieve eternal life by his own efforts, at least in part.

My friend, lest you think, "Well, that's just a small thing, isn't it? After all, this man wants to have eternal life! It's a free gift, isn't it?", watch carefully the Lord's answer.

II. We hear the Lord's answer (19-30).

To put it bluntly, it is relatively easy to get people to profess faith. But getting them to follow the Lord is another story. Yet I ask you, is a person who professes to believe in Jesus but who refuses to follow Jesus truly a Christian? It grieves my heart to think of the number of people I've led in the sinner's prayer, and even baptized, who are no longer living in obedience to Christ.

I've seen them shed tears. I've heard them say they wanted Jesus in their lives, and that they wanted to go to heaven. Just like the rich young ruler. But I have learned from Jesus' example, that just like the rich young ruler, they may have made a decision for which they were not ready. They had not counted the cost.

Listen beloved, the issue in Luke 18 is this man's salvation, not some higher level of discipleship subsequent to conversion. He wants to know how to obtain eternal life.

In our evangelism efforts, we spend most of our time trying to get people to admit their need. Here's a young man who admitted his need before he ever came to Jesus. He is a perfect candidate for salvation! He was ready to sign the card, walk the aisle, do whatever. There was no need to tell him that he needed something. He appeared ready. He was a hot evangelistic prospect. He was eager.

But Jesus chased him off.

You say, "Jesus did what?!" He chased him off.

"Why? Why would the Savior do that?" Frankly, John MacArthur is right in his observation that Jesus would have failed personal evangelism class in almost every Bible college or seminary in America! Here was a man who wanted to go to heaven, and Jesus gave him a message of works. He didn't mention faith or the facts of redemption. He didn't challenge the man to believe. He failed to pull in the net. He didn't ask the man to pray the sinner's prayer. After all, a good evangelist wouldn't let a guy get away who wanted to have eternal life, would he?

The very reason we ask that question shows how far off track our view of evangelism is these days. John MacArthur hits the nail on the head in his classic book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, when he writes (79), "Modern evangelism is preoccupied with decisions, statistics, aisle-walking, gimmicks, prefabricated presentations, pitches, emotional manipulation, and even intimidation. Its message is a cacophony of easy-believism and simplistic appeals. Unbelievers are told that if they invite Jesus into their hearts, accept Him as personal Savior, or believe the facts of the gospel, that's all there is to it. The aftermath is appalling failure, as seen in the lives of multitudes who have professed faith in Christ with no consequent impact on their behavior. Who knows how many people are deluded into believing they are saved when they are not?"

Jesus' aim wasn't to get a decision, but to make a disciple (which should be our aim, too). How do I know that? From Jesus' answer to this man. Jesus gave four things in His answer to this candidate.

A. Jesus gave an inquiry (19). "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."

The title "Good Teacher" is extremely rare in the rabbinic traditions. Its presence on the leader's lips indicates he's trying to impress Jesus with a compliment hoping to get one in return. In the Oriental world, one compliment requires a second.¹

But Jesus answers him with *no* title at all. In fact, Jesus' response sounds abrupt, almost harsh, "Why do you call me good?" It's as if Jesus is asking, "Do you really mean that or are you just saying it to sound pious?"

Jesus' next statement has caused debate for centuries. He says, "No one is good--except God alone." If Jesus is truly God, why did He say that? He said it because He knew the heart of this seeker. By making the statement He is clarifying the two options regarding His Person--"One, either I am not good or I am. And if I am good, I am God! Young ruler, which are you asserting by calling Me good?"

My friend, none of us will ever become a genuine Christian until we grasp the truth regarding two people.

1. *We must grasp the truth about Jesus.* That's what Jesus was forcing this seeker to see. Who is Jesus? Who do you believe Him to be? Is He merely a great teacher, or is He the Lord God?

2. *We must grasp the truth about ourselves.* In our story, Jesus is taking the man from where he was to where he needed to be. Where was he? The man's question indicates he thought he could do something to earn eternal life. He had a faulty view of himself. Ironically, after asking the follow-up question, Jesus doesn't wait for an answer. Rather, secondly...

B. Jesus gave instructions (20-21). By the way, what would the average Christian do if someone asked the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I doubt we'd give the answer Jesus gave. We'd say, "Pray this prayer! Don't delay. Go forward in church. Ask Jesus to come into your heart!" Why didn't Jesus do that when the candidate asked Him this question? Because He knew the man *wasn't* ready. There was a barrier.

We mustn't depend on canned approaches in evangelism. People are different. People bring different baggage with them to the Cross.

When the Philippian jailer asked, "What shall I do to be saved?" Paul answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." But when the young ruler asked Jesus practically the same question, Jesus gave a different answer.

Why? Did Jesus and Paul preach a different gospel? Absolutely not. They were dealing with different people who were at different levels of spiritual receptivity.

Notice what Jesus told the heaven-seeker in verse 20, "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'"

How do you help a person who has questions about his eternal destiny? Don't miss what Jesus did.

1. *He pointed the man to God's Law (20).* Most modern evangelistic presentations fail to do this, but Jesus didn't. He started with God's Law—in this case He quoted five of the Ten Commandments. Why? Because God's Law exposes man's sin.

¹ Bailey, 162.

The truth is, we have no business preaching grace to people who do not understand the implications of God's law. Law always precedes grace. It's the tutor that brings us to Christ (Gal 3:24).

When we talk to unsaved people, we must remember this. What happens if we bypass the Law? Here's what often happens.

We ask them, "Would you like to know that you're going to heaven when you die?" And they reply, "No thanks, my life is as good as the next person's." Or, "Would you like to be saved?" and they respond, "Saved? Why? I'm not lost." And when we ask, "Would you like to trust Jesus?" they reply, "What do you mean 'trust Him'? I have no problem with Him."

Listen carefully. By quoting the Law, Jesus wasn't insinuating that this man could achieve salvation by obeying the Law. In fact, Jesus doesn't tell the man to *do* the Law, but merely points the man to the Law by saying, "You know the commandments."

To which the man replies, "I've done that!" In other words, whereas Jesus pointed the man to God's Law...

2. *The man pointed to himself (21).* "'All these I have kept since I was a boy,' he said."

That's interesting. This fellow had a narrow view of sin, and an inflated view of himself. He's not claiming perfection. He has the mentality that's so common in our day, "If the good outweighs the bad in my life, and if I don't commit mortal sin, I'll be okay." Keep the Law? Yep, done that.

I need to call your attention to something very important. Jesus quoted from the Ten Commandments here, but He was very selective. He skipped over commands one to four, and referred to five of the last six commands.

How intriguing. Commands one to four have to do with our covenant responsibility to God (you'll find them in Exodus 20--No other gods; no graven images; no blasphemy; no abuse of the Lord's day).

But Jesus didn't mention those commands. Why not? Why did He select these commands? Because He knew the key that would unlock the door to help this man see the corruption of his heart was contained in the second section of commands, those dealing with our covenant responsibilities to people.

But not only was Jesus selective, He also rearranged the Ten Commands. Notice the order: "Do not commit adultery (that's the 7th command)," do not murder (6th), do not steal (8th), do not give false testimony (9th), and honor your father and mother (5th)."

Any good Jew, including this young ruler, would know that Jesus switched the order. And He'd also note that Jesus omitted one command, the tenth.

But why? Because command #10 is the punch line, the arrow that will pierce this self-righteous man's heart.

Here was a man who thought he was okay with God, and wanted Jesus to affirm him and tell him so. But Jesus didn't. He used the Law to expose His heart.

Jesus gave the young man four things that day, first an inquiry, followed by some instructions, and thirdly...

C. Jesus gave an invitation (22). "When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'"

You'll find no canned approach to evangelism with Jesus. He listens not only to what the person *said* but also to what he *meant*. On the surface, here was a man who seemed to want to be saved, but did he really? No. He didn't even know he was lost. So Jesus

pushed the hot button in his life--"You still lack one thing"--and followed up with a most unusual invitation. He invited him to do three things.

1. *Sell everything and give to the poor.* He had a lot to sell, for he was rich. After Clarence Darrow had solved a client's legal problem, the client asked, "How can I ever show my appreciation?" The lawyer replied, "My good friend, ever since the Phoenicians invented money, there has been only one answer to that question."²

To a man who loved his money, Jesus said, "Sell out."

You say, "I don't get it. What would getting rid of his possessions prove?" It would prove the man loved God more than the things God had given him. He claimed he had kept the Law. Had he? Externally, perhaps, but what about internally? In effect Christ said to him, "You say you have kept the Law, that you love your neighbor as yourself. Okay, prove it. That should be no problem for you."

Nobody is saved by giving money to the poor, but nobody can be saved who will not repent of his sins and turn from a life focused on self.

2. *Start living in light of eternity.* Jesus told him, "If you sell out and give to the poor, you will have treasure in heaven!" Charles Stanley made the interesting observation, "Each of us will eventually give away all our earthly possessions. How we choose to do so, however, is a reflection of our commitment to the kingdom of God."

3. *Come and follow Me.* Do you want a good definition of a Christian? A Christian is a follower of Jesus. Are you a follower of Jesus? I'm not talking about perfection, but I am talking about *passion*. Is it the passion of your life to know Jesus, to learn from Jesus, to walk in Jesus' steps (1 Pet 2:21)? If it's not, you have no reason to claim to be a Christian. It is a deficient gospel to say we can be saved and not follow Him.

How do I know that? Because of what happened next...

D. Jesus gave the implications (23-30). How did the man respond to Jesus' invitation? Verse 23 tells us, "When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth." Luke doesn't tell us this, but Matthew's account adds that "the man went away sad" (19:22).

He left! He was so eager when he came, but having heard the gospel Jesus preached, *he left*.

Answer this. Did Jesus go after him? Did the Savior call out, "Don't go! Come back! You must have misunderstood Me. Surely, we can work something out."? No. The fact is Jesus let him go. And in so doing, He taught us four implications regarding the gospel.

1. *We must follow Jesus on His terms, not ours (23).* The Lord made a frontal attack on the man's weakness--the sin of covetousness. He was living in violation of commandment #10, and blind to the fact. Until Jesus said to him, "Do you really want eternal life? Unless I am the highest authority in your life, there's no salvation for you."

Instead of going after the young ruler, Jesus revealed a second implication.

2. *It's hard for rich people to be saved (24-25).* "Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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.'"

Please don't water this down. In comparison with the world, *we* are rich, for we have more than we need. This man's riches kept him out of heaven. Why? It's not having money that keeps people from eternal life, for Abraham, David, and Solomon were

² Sweeting, 331.

wealthy men. It's *being possessed* by riches and *trusting* them that makes salvation difficult for the wealthy.³ Why is it hard for rich people to be saved?

As author Kenneth Bailey observes in his book *Through Peasants Eyes* (164), "People of wealth are often proud of their own achievements. They accept no favors, ask for no special consideration, and with exceptional effort achieve wealth. But status in God's presence cannot be earned. It can only be received with gratitude...With God there is no pulling up of one's self by the bootstraps."

In order to have eternal life, first of all we must follow Jesus on His terms, not ours. And He said it's hard for people who have a lot of things to be saved. Here's a third implication.

3. *No one can be saved apart from God (26-27)*. At this point, the people spoke up (26), "Those who heard this asked, 'Who then can be saved?'" They'd just seen Jesus turn away a person who was, to them, a prime candidate for salvation. If he couldn't be saved, after all he's done, who can?!

Jesus replied (27), "What is impossible with men is possible with God." The fact is, if salvation depended upon human effort at any point, no one would ever be saved. No one can be saved apart from the gracious working of God. God chooses. God calls. God grants repentance and faith. Salvation is of the Lord.

4. *We must receive eternal life, for we can't earn it (28-30)*. We see the climax of the story when we notice the contrast between what the rich ruler said and what Peter said in verse 28, "Peter said to him, 'We have left all we had to follow you!'"

By God's grace, Peter and the apostles did what the rich man refused to do. They followed Jesus. They admitted their sinfulness and pledged allegiance to the Savior.

So to them Jesus said (29-30), "I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

There's the point of the story. The young ruler erroneously thought eternal life could be earned, but Jesus clarified for Peter that it must be received.

You say, "Do I have to sell my possessions if I want to become a Christian?" And the answer is, no. In fact, you don't have to *do* anything. And the reason is that Christ already paid the price of redemption. He paid the debt in full.

When Jesus died on the Cross, He paid the penalty for sin, for *our* sin. Though He was perfect, God treated Him as though He had committed our sins, so that He might treat us as though we had lived His perfect life. Three days after He died Jesus rose again. Today God offers eternal life to all who will strip off their rags of self-righteousness and receive Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

If you want to have eternal life, the first prerequisite is to admit you don't deserve it and can do nothing to attain it. Nothing. You must acknowledge your utter spiritual bankruptcy to God. Then you must accept the One God provided to deliver you, His own Son, Jesus Christ.

"What do I say?" you ask. Pray the words of Augustus Toplady, taken from his well-known hymn, "Rock of Ages:"

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood, from Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure; cleanse me from its guilt and power.

³ Wiersbe, 250.

“Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save and Thou alone.

“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress, Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die!

“While I draw this fleeting breath, when my eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.”

This morning we've heard the sad story of what one young man did. He refused to come empty-handed to the Rock of Ages. And he left that day still in his sins. I'd like to tell you about the choice made by another young man.

On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot and four of his missionary companions shed their blood on the soil of Ecuador as martyrs for Christ. Five Auca Indians took their lives as they were trying to bring the gospel to the Auca tribe of sixty people. Four young wives lost their husbands and nine children lost their fathers.

The world called it a nightmare of tragedy. But Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth Elliot, wrote, "The world did not recognize the truth of the second clause of Jim Elliot's credo: He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."⁴

Dear friend, faith is not nodding your head to a series of facts about Jesus. It is following Jesus.⁵ The rich young ruler was more than willing to say he believed a few facts about Jesus. But he wasn't willing to follow Jesus on His terms.

What about you? The willingness to follow Jesus is the evidence that you've truly believed in Jesus. So ask yourself this concluding question...

Concluding Question: Am I truly a follower of Jesus?

This morning we have considered the true story of a man who came to the right Person, asked the right question, received the right answer, but made the wrong decision.⁶ What about you? Will you be honest with God and yourself this morning? Being a Christian is more than believing *about* Jesus. It's believing *in* Jesus. It's having a personal relationship with Him.

Let's allow what we've learned from God's Word to penetrate our hearts. Are you a follower of Jesus? Maybe you've prayed a prayer before, been baptized, and have been in this church for years, but right now, your heart is shaking. You are wondering, "Do I really have eternal life?"

Don't presume your spiritual condition. The young ruler walked away sad from Jesus, and we don't know if he ever came back. He walked away religious, but lost.

Will you repent of your sin today and become a follower of Jesus? Perhaps you are wondering, "What must I do to be saved?" Here's the answer.

You must admit the truth about yourself, that you are a sinner, and repent of your sin. And you must admit the truth about Jesus, that He alone can save you, through His atoning life, death, and resurrection. What you must do, God will enable you to do if you will call out to Him. Will you do so right now? Will you choose today to *follow Jesus*?

⁴ Piper, 210-11.

⁵ see Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?*, p. 61.

⁶ As Warren Wiersbe has fittingly put it.