

# Eternal Life

JESUS'S GIFT OF SALVATION DEMANDS HUMILITY AND SURRENDER.

John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937) was a businessman who was a driving force in establishing the Standard Oil Company. By 1882, Standard Oil had an almost complete monopoly in the oil business in the United States. At his death, Rockefeller had a net worth of 1.4 billion dollars (estimated to be 280 billion in today's money). When asked how much money was enough, Rockefeller supposedly said, "Just one dollar more."

A similar drive to reach success runs rampant in our culture. Television is replete with reality shows full of people seeking their fifteen minutes of fame. Success includes attaining great fame, money, expensive houses, expensive cars, and the list goes on and on. But the saying remains true: at the end of life you can't take any of that wealth with you. Focusing on the accumulation of wealth and the trappings of fame and fortune absent a saving relationship with Christ in the end leads to the loss of all that a person has spent a lifetime accumulating as well as their eternal soul.

In today's session we will see the disciples struggle over the Jewish belief that wealth indicated God's blessing and what Jesus said about rich people. They questioned Jesus about who could be saved. This set the stage for Jesus's lesson on the true reward of eternal life.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### Matthew 19:1-30

Matthew 19 details a pivotal moment in Jesus's ministry, addressing key topics such as marriage, divorce, childlike faith, wealth, and discipleship. Throughout Matthew 19, Jesus challenged cultural assumptions about marriage, wealth, and status, calling people to radical surrender and wholehearted devotion to God. His teachings underscored that eternal

life is not earned through good deeds but through faith, humility, and willingness to forsake all for the sake of following Him.

The Pharisees sought to trap Jesus by asking if a man could divorce his wife for any reason. Jesus pointed back to God’s original design for marriage (v. 4), and He affirmed marriage as a lifelong covenant (v. 6). Jesus explained that God permitted divorce due to human hardness of heart, but from the beginning, it was not God’s intent. He added that anyone who divorces, except for sexual immorality, and remarries commits adultery. His disciples, shocked by the strictness of this teaching, suggested it might be better not to marry at all. Jesus acknowledged that some remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom, showing that both singleness and marriage can be divine callings (vv. 3-12).

The disciples tried to turn away those who had brought their children to Jesus so that He could lay His hands on them and pray for them. But Jesus rebuked His disciples, saying, “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (v. 14). This moment underscored the humility and dependency required to enter God’s kingdom. The chapter closes with Jesus’s encounter with a man who inquired as to how to attain eternal life, which is the focus of this session.



## Unwilling (Matt. 19:16-22)

A rich man asked Jesus what he had to do to have eternal life. When Jesus told the man to keep the commandments, the man said he had kept all of them. Jesus then told him to sell everything he owned and give to the poor, then to follow Him. The young man was not willing and went away grieving.

### VERSE 16

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**Just then someone came up and asked him, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?”**

The story of the rich young man follows Jesus’s blessing of the children (vv. 13-15). Matthew contrasted the children with **someone** who approached Jesus. Mark wrote that the man came running and knelt before Jesus, so he came eagerly and reverently (Mark 10:17). Luke called

him a ruler (Luke 18:18), so likely he had a high social status, probably as an official in a Jewish synagogue.

The man called Jesus **“teacher,”** one who taught concerning the things of God, rather than the more common “rabbi.” It was a term of respect that was also given to scribes. His question, **“What good must I do to have eternal life?”** suggests an attitude of confidence that he was certain he could earn salvation by doing good of some sort. He wanted Jesus to identify some supremely righteous act that would secure him *eternal life*. “He was sure that entrance to eternal life was in his grasp if he only knew how to go about it.”<sup>1</sup>

#### VERSE 17

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**“Why do you ask me about what is good?” he said to him. “There is only one who is good. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”**

As Jesus often did, He answered the man’s question with a question of His own, **“Why do you ask me about what is good?”** Apparently Jesus wanted to probe the man to see why he had not found satisfaction in his pursuit of eternal life. Jesus challenged him to take his focus off himself and onto God’s absolute goodness with His next statement, **“There is only one who is good.”** Only God can define what constitutes goodness because He alone is perfectly good.

Continuing the lesson, Jesus told the man, **“If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”** We must not take Jesus’s words as dismissively telling the man, “just be good and do the best you can.” Rather, He said that God required keeping the commandments—all of them—perfectly in order for him to have eternal life. No one can possibly do that! Jesus wanted the man to know that his goodness would always fall short (Rom. 3:23).

#### VERSES 18-19

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**“Which ones?” he asked him. Jesus answered: “Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself.”**

As a dedicated Jew who believed in following the law, the man believed that he must prove himself worthy of God. However, this did not fit with what Jesus had just taught in the previous passage that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those with the faith and humility of

children (vv. 13-15). Jesus wanted to lead him to confess his need and dependency on God.

Rather than considering the implications of his self-reliance in his pursuit of eternal life, this young man wanted specifics. **“Which ones?”** This question had a practical basis. According to rabbinic calculations, the Pentateuch contained 613 commandments. So the man’s question was which commandments were a priority and should be focused on.

Jesus replied by listing five of the Ten Commandments: **“Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother.”** He also included **“and love your neighbor as yourself”** (Lev. 19:18), which He would include later in His twofold summary of the law (Matt. 22:37-40). These commandments have to do with the way people should treat other people. Jesus stressed the importance of the ethical treatment of others. His answer may have disappointed the young man because he had expected some higher service to God necessary in order to gain eternal life.

Clearly, Jesus did not intend to give the man the impression that if he could obey these commandments perfectly he would receive eternal life. Rather, He was exposing the man’s self-reliance so as to make him realize he could not possibly keep even this shorter list of commandments. Jesus wanted this young man to see his own spiritual bankruptcy.

## VERSE 20

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**“I have kept all these,” the young man told him. “What do I still lack?”**

The man sincerely believed what he said, **“I have kept all these.”** For the first time, Matthew described him as a **young man**, which would have made him between twenty-four and forty years of age, that he had not reached maturity. His answer exposed his lack of spiritual maturity when he declared that he had *kept* (meaning “guarded”) *all* these commandments. In the Greek text, the emphasis is on *all*.

Still searching for more, the man offered yet another simplistic question, **“What do I still lack?”** Although he likely believed that he had done all he knew to do to earn right standing with God, he wanted to know what he had missed.

## VERSE 21

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**“If you want to be perfect,” Jesus said to him, “go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”**

Jesus revealed to the young man what he still lacked. His response, **“if you want to be perfect,”** pointed back to the Sermon on the Mount and its command “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). *Perfect* denoted not moral flawlessness but completeness in the sense of maturity. God intended for His children to mirror their heavenly Father’s supreme good character which should be expressed through loving others like He loves. This kind of love would not permit the wealthy man to hoard his riches while people lived in poverty

The man’s search for perfection took an expected turn as Jesus identified his most glaring impediment. Jesus had omitted the command against coveting (Ex. 20:17) in His earlier statement, which He now brought to the forefront. Jesus confronted him with this commandment, **“go, sell your belongings and give to the poor.”** If the man would do this, Jesus promised that he would **have treasure in heaven** (see Matt. 6:20), not that getting into heaven came as a reward for good works. The selling of his possession marked only the first step of Jesus’s call for radical obedience, and the second step demanded even more—**“Then come, follow me.”**

## VERSE 22

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**When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.**

But this man, who had worshiped his wealth more than anything, could not forsake it when Jesus challenged him to sell everything and follow Him. This man refused to make the radical changes in his life because his **many possessions** made his life comfortable. The man did not go away because he found following Jesus unattractive; rather, it was the cost of giving away all his possessions that made him go **away grieving**.<sup>2</sup>



### Explore Further

Read the article “Eternal Life” on pages 512–513 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some common views on how to receive eternal life? The rich young man refused to follow Jesus because it would have meant the loss of all his possessions. If Jesus asked you to give up something that you highly value for the sake of following Him, how would you respond? Why?

## Possible (Matt. 19:23-26)

After the rich young ruler departed, Jesus explained to His disciples that riches can make it extremely difficult for a person to enter God's kingdom because wealth often leads to self-reliance rather than dependence on God. When the disciples expressed concern about who can be saved, Jesus reassured them that while human effort alone cannot achieve salvation, God has the power to make the impossible possible.

### VERSE 23

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**Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

Jesus seized the opportunity to use this young man's rejection to issue a warning to His disciples about the dangers of wealth. He showed the seriousness of His warning by beginning with **“Truly I tell you”** and proceeded to tell them that a wealthy person could **enter the kingdom of heaven** with difficulty. With all the advantages of wealth and influence, rich people may find it much more difficult to have the attitude of humility, submission, and service required to follow Jesus.

### VERSE 24

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**“Again I tell you, 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.”**

Intensifying His lesson, Jesus illustrated the difficulty for the rich to enter the kingdom with the use of hyperbole—an exaggeration for effect—by saying, **“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.”** Jesus used the image of the largest animal any of them would have ever seen passing through such a small opening as a metaphor for the impossible. Clearly Jesus deliberately did not use the analogy to insist on the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom of God, but to underscore the exceptional difficulty of this occurring. Unless someone turned and humbled himself in childlike trust (vv. 13-15), that person could not enter the kingdom of heaven.

### VERSE 25

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**When the disciples heard this, they were utterly astonished and asked, “Then who can be saved?”**

Jesus's statement about the rich man shook **the disciples** to the core. They found His words hard to accept. Matthew used a very strong expression, **utterly astonished**, to bring out the extent of their bewilderment. What Jesus said went far beyond mild surprise to that of calling into question ideas that they had accepted all their lives. Judaism held that material wealth indicated God's approval and blessing, so the disciples responded, **"Then who can be saved?"** From their point of view, God would only bless someone with great wealth who deserved it because of their goodness. If God excluded what they deemed as likely candidates for salvation, what hope existed for anyone else? They reasoned that if the rich cannot be saved, then they did not stand a chance.

## VERSE 26

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**Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."**

Christ responded with another shocking remark, one that was likely confusing at first. He **looked** at His disciples, meaning that Jesus fixed His gaze on them, because they were having difficulty comprehending what Jesus had told them. The disciples may have expected Jesus to say something like only the truly humble or poor in spirit can be saved (5:3) or that only those with childlike faith and dependence on God can be saved (19:13-15). Instead, Jesus agreed with the disciples, **"With man this is impossible."** No one can be saved by wealth, achievements, abilities, or good works. But God has an entirely different plan. Jesus went on to say, **"but with God all things are possible."** While Jesus slammed the door on human efforts to attain salvation, He declared that God can bring about salvation to anyone. They still had much to learn, especially since Jesus did not explain to them how God would bring this about: through Jesus's death on the cross.

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### **Explore Further**

Reread Matthew 19:25-26. Just as in the first century, people today have misunderstandings about how a person can "enter the kingdom of God." Think about some of the ways you have heard people answer this question, "Why would God allow you to enter into heaven?" How could you help them come to know that human efforts will always fall short?

## Reward (Matt. 19:27-30)

Peter responded by saying they had left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus promised the disciples that those who have left everything to follow Him will receive a hundred times more. True followers of Jesus, in contrast to the rich young ruler, will also inherit eternal life. He then told them that the first will be last and the last first: many who seem important now will be humbled, while those who seem insignificant will be exalted.

### VERSE 27

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**Then Peter responded to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?”**

Speaking for the rest of the disciples, Peter responded, **“See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?”** This emphasized the disciples’ interest in knowing what rewards they might expect for their obedience, having given up everything to follow Jesus. This question, coupled with the previous question (v. 25), suggests not a sense of entitlement but rather a great concern over what would or would not await them in eternity.

### VERSE 28

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**Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, in the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”**

Instead of rebuking Peter, Jesus answered graciously. Jesus looked toward **the renewal of all things**, referring to the new heavens and new earth which will be created at the return of Christ. Jesus described the moment when He will take His seat on the glorious throne of heaven in eternity (Rev. 21:1-5). **The Son of Man** recalls imagery from Daniel 7:13-14.

Jesus revealed that since His disciples **have followed** Him that they would have more than treasure in heaven. They would **sit on twelve thrones** and have positions of great responsibility and power alongside Him **judging the twelve tribes of Israel**. In other words, the disciples will reign with Christ at a time still in the future. The apostle Paul taught that all believers would judge the whole world and angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

## VERSE 29

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**“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life.”**

Jesus expanded His focus to include **everyone who has left houses** or family or property for the sake of His **name**. The phrase **because of my name** represents loyalty to Jesus. Everyone who has sacrificed people and possessions in order to follow Christ **will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life**. The phrase *a hundred times more* refers to an astonishing and miraculous increase (see 13:8,23). The reward will vastly exceed any sacrifice because every believer will inherit eternal life in the kingdom of heaven and be with Jesus forever.

## VERSE 30

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**“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”**

With this statement, Jesus combined warning and promise about a great reversal of the values of this world coming in the final judgment. Previously, the disciples had believed that a person’s wealth indicated God’s favor on earth and therefore the expectation of being blessed in the next life (vv. 23-25). The rich man became an example of one who was **first** in this life who would be **last** in eternity. Those who have forsaken everything to follow Jesus will enjoy great rewards in eternity. Jesus illustrated this with a parable in the next chapter (20:1-16).

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### **Explore Further**

Revisit the article “Eternal Life” on pages 512–513 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In terms of quality, how would you describe eternal life? How would you explain the present and future aspects of eternal life? Spend some time in prayer, asking God if there is anything in your life that you need to let go of to better follow and serve Him.

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1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 489.

2. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 793.