



It's All Grace or It's Nothing

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 19:13-26

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There are some themes that are repeated with regularity in the gospels – the deity and incredible power of Christ, the sinfulness and corruption of man, Jesus is the true Messiah – God’s Savior King, that discipleship requires the whole of your life, that not everyone who names the name of Christ will inherit the Kingdom of heaven but those who receiving the Word of God do the will of the Father who is in heaven, that righteousness is not a matter of outward observance but a matter of the heart, that judgment is coming and cannot be avoided, and that we are in desperate need of God’s grace in order to be saved. And that theme, our desperate need for grace, shines brightly in the text that we are looking at today beginning with Jesus blessing the little children and then His encounter with the rich, young ruler. Let’s look first as Jesus again presents the kingdom of heaven as

A Kingdom of Child-like Dependency (v. 13-15) Look with me again starting in verse 13: “Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away.” (Matthew 19:13–15, ESV)

This interlude is simple enough to understand, isn’t it? After dealing with the Pharisees, parents begin to come to Christ to have Him bless their children, to lay hands on them and pray for them. It is beautiful scene; one that points to the fact that Jesus was approachable, winsome , gracious and inviting. He did not set Himself apart from the people, did not put forth religious and pious airs of the Pharisees, did not give off an air of being too good to be bothered but instead He freely received people and gladly. So here are these people bringing their kids to Jesus for His blessing but the disciples are having none of it.

The disciples are trying to manage the situation and by “manage the situation” I mean they are trying to shut it down and restrict access to Jesus. Why are they doing that? There are many possibilities. Perhaps they were trying to protect Jesus and try to allow him to rest. Maybe they thought Him too important to be bothered for the sake of little kids. Maybe they thought that He had no time to waste dealing with these parents. Maybe, though, they simply wanted to keep Him to themselves. Maybe they did not want to share Christ with these whom they found annoying. Whatever the reason, they are doing their best to keep the people at an arm’s length, but will have none of it. While they are busy rebuking the people, Christ rebukes them, saying: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus tells the disciples to stand down and literally to “get out of the way” so that the children can come to Him, telling them once again that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those of childlike trust, faith, and dependency. Again we see the illustrated the gospel humility that is necessary to enter the kingdom. The children are a picture of the desperate dependency, the inability, the utter need, the humility required to enter the kingdom of heaven. Gospel humility is indispensable – there is no entering the kingdom, no coming to Jesus, no being received by Jesus apart from it. Children are needy and they know it. Kids, having nothing with which to bargain or barter, have no problem asking you what they want or what they need; they have no compunction about making requests. You see it the world over. I’ve seen it in Uganda. You have a kid that begs for a piece of gum, for instance and you give it to him. The next thing you know, you turn around and there are thirty kids with their hands out begging for gum. I’ve seen it in my own yard in the summer time, your kids come in the house and grab some ice pops and the next thing you know, half the neighborhood is swarming you as you are try to cut the grass saying stuff like, “We don’t have any ice pops at our house. My throat sure is dry. Orange is my favorite flavor in the whole world.” I’ve seen it in my kitchen with my neighbor kid who finding out what Gretch is making says, “That’s my favorite, Gretchen. My mom said I can stay for dinner if I want.” You know what I am talking about.

Jesus is reminding the disciples yet again that the kingdom of heaven is only open to the desperate, open to the needy, open to the hungry and thirsty who know they are hungry and thirsty and are not ashamed to say so, open to those who have nothing to offer, nothing to bargain with, nothing to commend themselves, who know their spiritual bankruptcy, who in humility simply come to Christ seeking grace. He uses this opportunity with these children to press this truth home.

This theme is inescapable in Matthew's gospel. Ever since we first heard the words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3, ESV), the necessity of spiritual humility to receive the salvation that Christ alone can give has been one of the underlying themes of this gospel. Blessed are those who are spiritually needy, who realize how desperately needy they are of God's grace, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Remember what it means to be poor in spirit. To be poor in spirit is to view ourselves as we stand in the presence of God. As I stand before God, I know that in myself, I am nothing, I have nothing, I can do nothing good and I deserve nothing good. I deserve judgment. I am by nature a sinner, rightfully under the holy wrath of God for my rebellion – no excuses, no extenuating circumstances, no blameshifting – and I deserve nothing but His judgment. I have nothing with which to buy the favor of heaven. If I am to have any standing with God at all, I can do nothing but look to Him in utter submission and in utter dependence upon Him and beg His grace and mercy. Anyone who is spiritually proud, who thinks that there is something in them that will make God accept them – those people are lost. There is no entering God's Kingdom without a real understanding of your spiritual need and how that need is only met in Christ alone. And that demands a gospel humility, childlike dependency, a heart that comes to Christ, nothing in our hands to receive what only He can give. And this sets the stage for Christ's encounter with the man whom we call "the rich, young ruler". We are to see the clear contrast between childlike faith and humility and the hubris of this young man...

A Rich Man Blind to His own Poverty (v.16-22) Immediately after this interaction with the kids, we read of Jesus' encounter with this young man: "And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.'" (Matthew 19:16–17, ESV) Now this man is rich; he is young; and Luke tells us that he is a ruler, which probably means that he held a position of prominence in the local synagogue. So he is a rich, young, ruler who has everything going for him and he comes to Jesus with a very specific question: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

He asks Jesus – what good thing, what good deed he must do in order to guarantee, to earn for himself, to acquire as his possession eternal life – eternal acceptance, union and communion with God. This young man sees salvation as a matter of doing a certain good thing that will translate into eternal life. He clearly has a highly developed sense of himself and of his abilities

and character, as we will see in just a moment. He is clearly clueless as to the depth of his sin and the utter holiness of God. He is profoundly blind to the holiness and intrinsic goodness of God, profoundly lacking in the awareness of his own sin and overestimates his own personal righteousness and place before God. The heart of this question is “How do I earn eternal life? How do I make God my debtor?” It is not the words that he uses, but it is the underlying heart of his question. The reason we know that is by the way that Jesus responds to him.

Jesus’ response to this man is markedly different than the way that the modern evangelical would respond to him in this situation. Today, modern evangelicals would give the guy a 3 or 4 part gospel presentation, ask him to make a commitment to Christ, and then send him on his way assured of his salvation, but that is not how Jesus responds. Instead, Jesus sees his heart and begins to confront this guy’s misconceptions about himself and about God. He says: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” Jesus is making a point here that we cannot miss. When He says to this guy “Why are you asking me about what is good. There is only one who is good,” He is making the point that this guy is asking the impossible. There is nothing good that this man can do to make God obliged to him because he is unable to do anything that is good in the truest sense, in the divine sense of the word. He cannot do anything in his own power that is holy, that is righteous, which is acceptable in God’s eyes. He is not good, only God is. God is good with an incomprehensible fullness of goodness and purity and perfection that we cannot even begin to comprehend. There is nothing that this man could do, no deed he could accomplish, that would be acceptable to the God of such moral purity and spotlessness. That is the point. He is asking for something that doesn’t exist.

We need to understand that when Jesus tells this young man to “keep the commandments,” He is not endorsing his thoughts of self-righteousness and salvation by works. Rather, it is an invitation by Jesus for this man to evaluate soberly the condition of his soul before God, to see His debt of sin, to see how far short of “good” he really was. He needed to examine himself in light of the commandments of God and to see that he is a desperate sinner who needed more than a “good deed” to gain eternal life.

He stands in massive contrast to the children spoken of before him. Children do not need to be convinced that they are needy, but this guy comes to Christ almost as if he is looking for commendation from Him. So, for that reason, we read:

“He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?”” (Matthew 19:18–20, ESV)

Jesus gives this young man a representative list of the commandments, ones that without a doubt he had broken. He focuses on these specific commandments because Jesus realizes that this man is proud of his social and religious achievements. Not surprisingly, this rich young respected man responds that he is impeccable in his character. He’s done all of this. And this response that he kept each of them since his youth reveals his true problem. His thought that he has been basically good and obedient to the law of God shows how blind he really is. His spiritual self-confidence rests on a fantasy – his own supposed goodness. The young man is a self-idolater. He regarded the law as a means of justifying himself before God rather than condemning him. He actually thinks of himself as blameless. He is sufficiently impressed with himself that he sees no need for grace, no need for a savior.

He demonstrates a massive misdiagnosis of his own heart and a small regard for the holiness of God. He is clearly thinks far too highly of himself and far too little of what the commandments of God require. As I said before, I could be wrong about this, but I really get the sense from this text that this rich young man was coming to Jesus to be congratulated or to be commended for his impeccability. It is almost like he waiting for Jesus to respond to his statement: “All these I have kept. What do I still lack? ” by saying, “Well, there is nothing left for you to do. You’re in!” And that, I think, is why he is stunned with what Jesus says next.

“Jesus said to him, “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.”” (Matthew 19:21, ESV) Having professed his faithful keeping of all of the commandments that Jesus listed for him, rather “tongue in cheek” – because this man is nowhere near perfect, Jesus 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.” It is almost like Jesus is saying, “You have kept all of the commandments since your youth? How about the first and the greatest commandment – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Give up everything you have, the life that you have created, the possessions that you believe that you have earned, sell it all, give

what you make to the poor, gain treasure in heaven and come follow me.” Now understand this rightly. Jesus is not laying down a new condition for salvation, a new normative act that all must do in order to be saved, required of all disciples – selling everything that you own and giving it all away. Reading it like that has caused some questionable teaching and practices, some extra-biblical and unbiblical legalistic additions. All of which is really just another way of trying to do the one “good deed” that this young ruler asked about first – if I do this one thing, I prove I am saved... Jesus does not demand that every disciple sell everything that they own. In fact, this is the sole occasion where Jesus commands someone to sell everything and give it away – but Jesus does demand complete devotion and a laying aside of every other god.

Jesus is exposing this man’s heart, exposing his sinfulness by revealing what was of greatest value to him --- all of his wealth and possessions that he thought were a reward for his stellar character, that he thought – as was generally thought in those days – was an evidence of God’s pleasure, acceptance, and favor toward Him. His greatest treasure was not Christ, was not God, was not salvation, but was himself and all that he possessed. To have God, you must give up the gods that you worship – in this case his self-righteousness and his wealth. Jesus is calling this man’s bluff, so to speak. He came claiming to want to know the one “good deed” he could do, the one thing that he could accomplish in order to be saved, but he is insincere and Jesus knows it. Do you see it? Christ tells him to give up everything, to give up all that he owns, the position and wealth that are his, to give up his assumed spiritual wealth and the material wealth that came with that – the material wealth in that day was seen as evidence of God’s favor and His blessing and was a badge of this man’s righteousness – give all of this up -- in essence to humble himself completely and to give up all claims and rights to himself and his possessions, and to follow Jesus.

This man is revealed as a self-idolater and a lover of money and the wealth that his self-idolatry brought him. And not only does this man overestimate his righteousness regarding the law, he overstates his desire to have eternal life. The truth is that this rich young ruler is insincere in all of his asking regarding eternal life, for when Christ tells him the one “good deed” that he needs to do in order to be saved, he refuses to do it. We read in verse 22:

“When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” (Matthew 19:22, ESV) His request for the “good deed” ends with him walking away from Christ, unwilling to lay down the things that most values and desires, unwilling to humble himself and to be completely dependant upon Christ in every way. He had not kept the commandments

perfectly, not one of them. Jesus proved that to him. But to admit truth and to act on it – to humble himself and come to Christ for salvation, to repudiate himself as his own savior, to divest himself of the security of his self-righteousness and the security of material riches was more than he was willing to give up. Material riches, a high view of our spiritual wealth leads to an overconfidence, to a self-righteousness that is the very antithesis of the childlike spirit of trust dependence upon the goodness and mercy of God. So this man walks away, He leaves the one who holds salvation in His hands, unwilling to give up his imagined control of his destiny, unwilling to admit His need, unwilling to see Himself as a spiritual beggar. And Jesus does not chase him down but allows him to walk away. He will be saved by grace, through humble faith in Christ, or not at all. And beloved, that is the theme.

It's All By Grace or It's Nothing (v. 23-26) The disciples are shocked by what has just taken place before their eyes and Jesus knows it, so we read in verses 23-24, "And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. 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.'" (Matthew 19:23–24, ESV) As is Jesus' way, what He says here is layered and rich. It is a hard thing for the rich man – the one rich in self-righteousness or rich in possessions – the kind of man that this rich young ruler represents perfectly, to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is so hard, Jesus says, that it is human impossibility. He says: 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. It is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle and it is impossible for a rich man to be saved. Because this man regarded himself as spiritually rich, because he was materially rich, he did not see or feel his desperate need for grace from God. He did not see himself as the beggar that he really was. His reputation, his wealth, his riches and the grip that they had on his heart made him blind to his true poverty and unwilling to, in humility, come to Christ for grace.

"When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" (Matthew 19:25, ESV) Again, they were shocked. This was a man who was outwardly righteous and moral. As I said before, the disciples thought that he was obviously favored of God because he had great possessions. He showed every sign of being favored by God. He was a paragon of human goodness, at the top of the food chain when it came to humanity, the best humanity could offer. If this guy could not be saved, this prime, who could be saved? If it was impossible for him to be saved, who could be saved? It was not surprising that they asked the question.

“But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”” (Matthew 19:26, ESV) He looks at his disciples, looking into their eyes, and says “With man, salvation is impossible, but not for God.” The young man came to Christ with the thought that he both had the ability and the desire, in himself, to do something to satisfy God’s righteousness and to qualify himself to enter the kingdom of heaven. But the truth is, like all of us, he had neither. Jesus reply sets this whole encounter in perspective. He says plainly that no-one can be saved by their own hand, by their own merit. It is utterly impossible for a religious person, for a rich person, indeed for anyone to be saved. No-one can earn their way into heaven. If we cannot earn heaven by our own righteousness, if we cannot lay hold of heaven by our riches and wealth, if even the desire to truly be saved escapes us, the only way that anyone will ever be saved is if God acts independently of us and saves us. Our only hope is a miracle. And make no mistake, beloved, salvation is a miracle.

It was a miracle that Christ stepped down from His rightful throne and took to himself human flesh. It was miraculous that the Holy One of Heaven, the King of Glory humbled Himself becoming a servant, becoming a man. It was a miracle that He lived a sinless, perfect, holy life, fully pleasing to God the Father. It was a miracle that He laid down His life as an atonement for our sin and paid in full upon the cross in three hours what we could not in an eternity in hell. It is a miracle that God the Father would choose to accept His sacrifice and death in our place, counting him as guilty of our sins and counting us as perfectly righteous and faithful to keep the law. It is a miracle that Christ would be delivered up and die for our trespasses and be raised from the dead three days later for our justification, that he would lay his life down for his sheep and take it up again. It is a miracle that by the pouring out of Christ’s blood, our sins, our stains, can be fully cleansed. It is a miracle that Christ’s blood is all our righteousness and salvation and our only plea before the throne of God. And, wonder of wonders, it is a miracle that God would change a human heart and open blinded eyes to stop trusting in our own imagined goodness or the wealth of this world as our salvation and turn our hearts to God in Christ. It is as Charles Spurgeon said: The Lord knows right well that you cannot change your own heart, and cannot cleanse your own nature; but he also knows that he can do both. He can cause the Ethiopian to change his skin, and the leopard his spots. Hear this, and be astonished: he can create you a second time; he can cause you to be born again. This is a miracle of grace, but the Holy Ghost will perform it. It would be a very wonderful thing if one could stand at the foot of the Niagara Falls, and could speak a word which should make the river Niagara begin to run upstream, and leap up that great precipice over which it now rolls in stupendous force. Nothing but the power of God could achieve that marvel; but that would be more than a fit parallel to what

would take place if the course of your nature were altogether reversed. All things are possible with God.

All of this is of grace, by God's power, according to His will, as a result of His mercy and love toward us who are sinners by nature and who are poor and needy in the most significant of ways and who have been humbled of great thoughts concerning ourselves and have had our eyes open to the exceedingly great worth of Christ our Lord. The way to life has never been by performing the one "good deed" that will obligate God to grant me eternal life. The way to life is a heart that says, "I need God. I am lost without Him. I am nothing without Him. All of my righteousness is nothing. I need His righteousness, His grace, His forgiveness, His fellowship, I am nothing without Him. I need Christ and His salvation." You must throw yourself on the mercy of God and find the riches of His grace as the sole grounds of acceptance with the Almighty, Holy, Righteous God. Our only hope is God's grace. Salvation is entirely of God's grace or it is not at all. The great lesson in this text today is our desperate need for gospel humility that loves God and His grace. Do you have it?

Do You Have Gospel Humility that Loves God's Grace?

Do you have a gospel humility that loves God's grace in Christ? Do you have deep sense of dependence upon Christ for life, a willingness to lay down everything else to have Him, a real longing for salvation at any cost? Do you delight in God's grace? Do you have gospel humility? Here is a great way to test if you do or not. Let me ask you a question and I want you to really think about it: do you really love, or does the plain statement of the gospel offend you? When someone declares that you're a sinner and that in yourself you deserve the condemnation of God, but that God, out of His love, in His grace and mercy has sent His Son to do something that you are helpless to do, to bear the penalty of your sin, to pay the debt of your wickedness with His blood and to earn a righteousness for you by His own obedience to the law so that by His grace through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ you can be made a child of God, does that offend you, or make you uncomfortable? Does it offend you for someone to say, yes, you're a sinner and you deserve to be condemned and the only reason that you are not is because God grants grace and mercy to filthy sinners like you? Does that sound a little harsh? Does that sound offensive to the good person that you are? Does it fail to take into account your good qualities? Does it just seem a little overboard, a little overdone, too often repeated? If the gospel offends you or makes you uncomfortable, the truth is, you may not yet have tasted of the gospel humility that Jesus says is necessary for His kingdom. You may not love God's grace.

Or instead, when you hear that message that you are but a sinner saved by grace does it thrill your soul and set you to worship God for His inexhaustible love toward you? Do you love to hear the gospel truth that your salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and none of your deeds, none of your wealth contributed to it? Do you love to hear of the saving work of Christ, all that you have been delivered from, all that God has rescued you out of? Those who know what it is to have gospel humility never get tired of the story of God's grace.

The reason that Jesus keeps repeating this theme with His disciples is this: We never outgrow our need for grace. Not for salvation and not for living before the face of God as His people. Jesus wanted His disciples to remember that at all times. We need to remember this. The Laodicean church forgot the necessity of grace and gospel humility to receive it. Christ admonished and reproved them saying: "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see." (Revelation 3:17–18, ESV) We never outgrow our need for grace or our need for Christ in whom that grace alone is found. If we feel self-sufficient, we are greatly deceived, and we need to reassess our total dependence on Christ for our life. We never grow past the gospel. We never grow past our need, our desperate need for God's grace. That is the truth of the gospel and the it is the truth of this table that we celebrate today.

This gospel is the gospel of grace and this table is the table of grace. It is not for the spiritually proud, not for the perfect, not for those who see themselves as pretty good, but for those who see themselves as needy. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 connects partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner with failing to examine yourself and with failure to discern the body. So what does this mean? Some people have really confused this and thought that coming to the table of grace requires you to possess a certain worthiness, to earn it, so to speak and that misunderstanding has caused some people to go on a never-ending quest to root out and discover every unconfessed sin, to engage in morbid introspection in order to unearth whatever might be hidden in the dark recesses of their souls that would make them unworthy. Others take it to mean that you have to have a certain level of consistent nearly perfect living before you can partake. If this means that we would have to be sure that we were absolutely sinless before we could partake of the Lord's Supper then none of us would be able to partake of it

until Jesus comes back and we are glorified. That is not what this means. In fact it misses the point.

When we come to the table, Paul says we need to examine ourselves...how? We need to examine our hearts and ask the question: Am I trusting in Christ alone, in His body and blood given for me, for salvation? Am I trusting in Him alone or is legalism sneaking into my life? Am I fighting sin or am I using grace as a license for sin? Am I approaching this table humbly, reverently and with thanksgiving and gratefulness? If there is anything about which you need to repent, you do it. And you come to this table conscious that it is only by God's grace and it will forever be by God's grace that you are welcome.

Let's prepare our hearts...

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