

LUKE 18:18–30. (EHV)

A certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good, except one—God. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother.’” “I have kept all these since I was a child,” he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” But when the ruler heard these words, he became very sad, because he was very rich. When Jesus saw that the man became very sad, he said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! In fact, 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.” Those who heard this said, “Then who can be saved?” He replied, “What is impossible for people is possible for God.” And Peter said, “Look, we have left our possessions and followed you.” He said to them, “Amen I tell you: Anyone who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will most certainly receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life.”

Many readers and interpreters of the Bible stumble all over this account. They either boldly interpret it incorrectly, or they walk away from it scratching their heads. The young man calls Jesus good. Why does Jesus seem to discourage him from that? Why does Jesus point him to the commandments for entering eternal life? Do we really have to sell all that we have and give it to the poor in order to have treasure in heaven? These are just a few questions raised by this account that don’t seem to be easily answered.

This account is not actually all that difficult to understand. But in order to understand it, we need to pay close attention to the first question Jesus asked the rich young ruler: “Why do you call me good?” We need to know why the rich young ruler was calling Jesus good, and we need to know ourselves why Jesus is good.

1. Why Jesus Is Good—To Those Like the Ruler

Why was the rich young ruler calling Jesus good? Mark tells us that this man “ran up to [Jesus] and fell on his knees before him.” Matthew tells us that he was a young man, probably between twenty and thirty years old. Luke tells us that he was some sort of ruler or leader. And all three Gospels tell us that he was rich. He fell on his knees before Jesus and asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus asks him in return, “Why are you calling me good?” And we can tell from the way the rich young ruler asks the question why he was calling Jesus good: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Matthew tells us more specifically that he asked, “What *good thing must I do* to inherit eternal life?”

In other words, this man had the same natural notions that every human being has—that inheriting eternal life depends on the good things that we do. And that’s why he called Jesus good, because he perceived that Jesus was a human being who had certainly done the right good things and had done enough of them to inherit eternal life. He viewed it like if someone today

were to approach an MVP baseball player and say, “Hey All-Star, what adjustment can I make to my approach to hitting so that I can be a good hitter too?”

This is the way that most people still view Jesus today. I have a book on my shelf in my office titled *Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. The premise is that both Jesus and Buddha teach you how to live in such a way that you can be at peace in your life. Most people from authors of books to authors of magazine articles to university students to the average Joe on the street will tell you that Jesus was a good person and that we should imitate him. If you pressed them, they would probably also say that, *if* there is a heaven, he’s probably there. But he’s there, they think, precisely because he had compassion on the poor and the sick, because he spent time and talked with those whom others wouldn’t spend time and talk with, because he taught people to love each other. And *if* there is a heaven, we’ll get there by imitating that as much as possible.

But Jesus himself puts the kabosh on that. If that’s the only reason we call him good or think that he’s good, because he’s a role model that we can imitate and thereby earn the inheritance of eternal life, he says, “No one is good, except one—God.” In other words, “If you want to do something good to inherit eternal life, if you want to view me as nothing more than a good human you can imitate in order to get to heaven, realize just how good you have to be—as good as God.” And Jesus right away rules out any possibility of being that good by saying, “No one is good except *one*—God.” Notice, by the way, that Jesus isn’t denying that he is that good—which, by the way, would also mean that he is God; he is simply trying to impress upon the rich young ruler that he is calling Jesus good for the wrong reason.

Jesus goes on to reinforce this for the man by telling him, “You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother.’” In effect, Jesus is saying, “Do you see how impossible it is to be good enough to inherit eternal life through your own effort?”

But the rich young ruler is naïve and doesn’t see. “I have kept all these since I was a child,” he declares.

And now Luke tells us that Jesus says something pretty remarkable in response. The man is viewing the commandments only from an outward point of view. So Jesus grants him that point of view, and grants that he has kept them from an outward point of view. But he needs the man to see what is at the heart of God’s law and to see how impossible it is for him to keep it according to the way God intends it. So imagine a table between this man and Jesus, and Jesus has the Ten Commandments sitting on the table for this man to look at. But the man isn’t seeing them correctly, so Jesus in effect takes his arm and clears all of them off the table and replaces them with one special commandment—tailored just for this rich young ruler. Not for all of us. Just for him. To lead him to see that Jesus is not good in the way the man thinks he is. Jesus says, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Jesus plays the man’s outward game with the commandments, but he does it so that the man will eventually come to realize an inward reality: He thinks he has kept all of the other commandments, but he hasn’t even kept the First—“You shall have no other gods before me.” He loves money and possessions and wealth more than God. Jesus would have certainly remained true to his word if this man had done as Jesus told him to. But Jesus knew that he

wouldn't, that he couldn't. That was the point. The man didn't fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Many people want to make this Bible text primarily about money and wealth. But it's not primarily about money and wealth. It's about how you think you're getting to heaven. It's about where your trust is. It's about why Jesus is good.

Now certainly, the idolatry that this rich young ruler struggled with may very well be our idolatry. Ask yourself: What if Jesus gave *me* this one special commandment? Would I be able to do it? Would I truly be able to sell *everything* I had and give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Jesus in abject poverty from then on, because I would view having treasure in heaven as more important than any of my treasures on earth?

I think that those questions were also bouncing around in the minds of Jesus' disciples, because when the man went away sad, Jesus said to his disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! In fact, 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." And we're told that those who heard him say that responded, "Then who can be saved?"

Perhaps they thought, like many today, that wealth was a sign that God approved of your life. Perhaps they were simply being honest about what a draw wealth is. They also realized that Jesus wasn't just saying that it was difficult for rich people because they were rich, but that it was difficult for rich people because they tend to trust in riches. But it isn't just the rich who trust in riches. A beggar with nothing can be rich in the way Jesus identifies the rich here, because if they think, "If I just had a million dollars, I would be safe and happy," then they have the same problem the rich do. And Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a person like that to enter the kingdom of God. By the way, some people say that "the eye of a needle" was the name of a gate in Jerusalem where people had to force camels to their knees and then push them through with difficulty, but that is complete fiction. Jesus is talking about the eye of a needle just like the kind in your sewing box. And a camel simply cannot fit through that. He is saying it is impossible.

Maybe this special commandment would be the same for you. After all, all that you have includes your computers, tablets, cell phones, and other devices, with all the social media accounts and apps that you have on them, which it seems we cannot do without today. But maybe the special commandment would be different for you. Maybe money and all that it can buy is something you could take or leave. So what might Jesus say to you?

"Go home and tell your family, your father and mother, your sons and daughters, your husband, your wife, and your friends, you will never see them again, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." We could put an added twist on this if we had Jesus assuring us that we also wouldn't see them in heaven. Would we still consider treasure in heaven to be more valuable than family?

Or what if it was this: "Never watch another movie again, and never again attend a show, concert, or performance, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Or what else might it be for you, that might lead you to go away from Jesus sad, or at the very least hesitate for a very long time?

The point: If we only view Jesus as good because we think that he's done enough good to inherit eternal life and we can too, just by imitating him, then we are calling Jesus good for the wrong reason. Jesus acknowledged that this is impossible for people.

2. Why Jesus Is Good—In Actuality

But then Jesus immediately tells them why he is good: “What is impossible for people is possible for God.” Because of Jesus, God can fit us sinful camels through the eye of the needle into the kingdom of God. Because of Jesus, God can take our trust, which is naturally anchored on what we can see and perceive, and anchor it instead on what is not seen. Because of Jesus, God can lead us to abandon our work-righteousness and self-righteousness and instead to cast ourselves entirely on his righteousness.

Jesus is not good because he's just another guy who has figured out how to lead a good life that impresses God and that we can imitate and hopefully impress God too. He is good because he is God himself in the flesh, leading a perfect life in our place. He is good because he is God himself in the flesh, exposing just how evil and wicked and not good we are by nature. He is good because he is God himself in the flesh, willing to take all our evilness, all our wickedness, on himself and to suffer the punishment for us. He is good because is God himself in the flesh, having essentially done what he told this rich young man to do. He gave up all that he had, and from the perspective of this account, was about to give up the only thing he had left, his life, for the poor, for us poor sinners. He is good because he is God himself in the flesh, to save human flesh, to save you and me.

Not until we see him as good for that reason can we also view him as our role model in the right way—not to earn eternal life by imitating him, but to live as those who are already inheriting eternal life through faith in him. Not until we see him as good for that reason can we actually be ready truly to give up anything and everything for his sake, because we know that our treasure in heaven is truly greater.

When Jesus asks, “Why do you call me good?”, when others ask, “What's so good about Jesus?”, be ready to answer unconventionally. He's not good because he shows us what to do in order to inherit eternal life. He is good because he invites us to believe that he has already won eternal life for us, even though we are bad people by nature, so that through faith in his goodness, he might clothe us in his goodness. He is good because he is our Savior. Amen.