

DID THE RICH YOUNG RULER HEAR THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS?

HAL M. HALLER
Lithonia, Georgia

The gospel according to Jesus has been a hot topic since the first century (cf. Gal 1:6-9). A book by that name was published a decade ago. Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler was used prominently by the author in defense of his thesis that to be saved one must yield everything to the Lord Jesus.

Did the rich young ruler (RYR) hear the gospel according to Jesus? Did he hear the "good news" of the gospel, or did he receive nothing but "bad news"? Did he hear the message of grace, or did Jesus minister the law to him so that he might be prepared to receive the message of grace at a future date?

This article will also explore two alternative interpretations: that Jesus was merely demanding proof from the young man that he was truly saved,¹ or that Jesus showed the RYR that he fell short of God's standard and that He showed the disciples that sacrificial discipleship results in eternal rewards.²

This presentation is based primarily on parallel accounts in the Synoptic Gospels of a certain incident that took place as Jesus was entering Judea for the last time and heading towards the cross (Matt 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-22; and Luke 18:18-27).³ A man ran to Jesus

¹"Obedience to Christ would *demonstrate* faith in the person of Christ and faith alone could bring the man to a righteousness that would admit him to the Messianic Kingdom" (J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981], 360). This view holds that the RYR was hearing the results of the gospel message as a test as to whether or not he believed.

²Robert Govett, *Entrance into the Kingdom* (Miami Springs: Conley & Schoettle, 1978), 127-41; Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 186ff; Arlen Chitwood, "The Rich Young Ruler," in *The Heavenly Calling* XV, No. 1 (Norman, OK: The Lamp Broadcast, Inc., January 1989), 1-4.

³These passages contain special details, some of which are found only in one or two of the accounts. This is in keeping with the unique purpose

and knelt before Him (Mark 10:17). Both actions speak readily of his enthusiasm and sincerity. Matthew alone mentions him as young; only Luke states that he was a ruler;⁴ but all three Synoptic Gospels recognize that he was wealthy. Hence, he is typically referred to as the Rich Young Ruler.

I. THE VIEW THAT JESUS PRESENTED THE GOSPEL TO THE RICH YOUNG RULER

A number of writers and commentators particularly identify the following words as a clear presentation of the gospel by Jesus which, if followed, will result in the hearer obtaining eternal life.

If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (Matt 19:21, NKJV).

One thing you lack...Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me (Mark 10:21).

of writing for each Gospel writer. However, when these passages are taken together, they present a fuller picture of what actually took place. The reader is referred to Gleason L. Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 330-31 for an interpretive harmonization of the Synoptic accounts. For those who object to Archer's procedure as too simplistic, the reader is urged to consult Kelly Osborne, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Gospel Interpretation: A Test Case" in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 289-316. See also Robert L. Thomas "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics" in the same work, 356-60.

⁴Was the RYR a religious leader or a civic leader? The traditional understanding is that he was a religious leader, perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin. If a civil leader, he is possibly a magistrate or official of the high priest. If religious, he is possibly a synagogue official or leader of the Pharisees. See Darrell Bock *Luke 9:51-24:53, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 2:1476.

⁵John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Revised and

You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me (Luke 18:22).

In commenting on Matthew 19, John F. MacArthur, Jr., states:

There we read of a young man who asks in the clearest possible terms how he can lay hold of eternal life. If there was ever a place to look for a *straightforward presentation of the gospel according to Jesus*, we would expect it here.⁵

MacArthur's understanding of the gospel according to Jesus is as follows:

If we could condense the truth of this entire passage into a single statement, it would be Luke 14:33: "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."

Our Lord gave this young man a test. He had to choose between his possessions and Jesus Christ. He failed the test. No matter what points of doctrine he might affirm, because he was unwilling to turn from what else he loved most, he could not be a disciple of Christ. Salvation is only for those who are willing to give Christ first place in their lives.⁶

Walter J. Chantry sees the account of the rich young ruler as "a vivid instance of the elements essential to Gospel preaching which are found everywhere in the New Testament."⁷ He goes on to paraphrase Jesus' challenge to the young man:

Expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, 1994), 84-85.

⁶MacArthur, 85. Darrell Bock, who also believes Jesus spoke the gospel to the RYR, states regarding Jesus' call to him, "God is to be trusted and to have first place," *Luke*, 1483 and "To obey Jesus is to give first place to Him," *Luke*, 1475.

⁷Walter J. Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 16; But, see D. A. Carson's comment in *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 110-11.

⁸Chantry, 60.

⁹Ernest C. Reisinger, *Lord and Christ: The Implications of Lordship for*

I will give you eternal life if you come and follow me. You become my servant. Submit your mind to my teachings; for I am the Great Prophet. Bow your will to my commandments; for I am your King. Only on these terms do I offer any salvation or life.⁸

The gospel according to Jesus as understood by MacArthur and Chantry, as well as a host of other commentators, is that Jesus framed the gospel message in a call for committed discipleship, surrender to the Lordship of Christ, and repentance of (turning from) sin.⁹ Chantry even goes to the extent of equating the gospel and law. He asserts:

When Jesus said, “Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor” he was preaching the tenth commandment in an applicatory fashion. Christ was using God’s word, “Thou shalt not covet,” as a knife to lance the festering sin of greed in the man’s soul.¹⁰

First, Chantry points out the young man’s particular sin of covetousness to measure the depth of his greed. But then he maintains that “it was also an essential demand of the Gospel that he forsake his wealth.”¹¹ This demand he equates with repentance, a change of mind entailing a turning from sin. Thus, Chantry apparently regards the

Faith and Life (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994), 67; Robert Lescelius, *Lordship Salvation: Some Crucial Questions and Answers* (Asheville, NC: Revival Literature, 1992), 108; Kenneth L. Gentry, “The Great Option: A Study of the Lordship Controversy,” *Baptist Reformation Review* 5:61 (Spring 1976), 75; Arend J. ten Pas, *The Lordship of Christ* (n.p.: Ross House, 1978), 5; Jim Wallis, “Few to Belief...Few to Obedience,” *Sojourners* 5:3 (March 1976), 21, 22; Frank Stagg, “Matthew,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 190; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 368; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 424; James Montgomery Boice, *Christ’s Call to Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 82; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-18 Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 33B:558.

¹⁰Chantry, 44.

¹¹Chantry, 47.

¹²Chantry, 21. MacArthur seemingly backs away from this in saying, “To suggest the law is a means to eternal life clouds the issue of faith.” At the point

demands of the law and the demands of the gospel as essentially one and the same. He sees the law as a diagnostic tool to expose the sin of the sinner, but he also sees it as “a condition of having eternal life.”¹² The commands to “go, sell, give, come, and follow” are the equivalent of “repent and believe.”¹³

at which Jesus advises keeping the commandments, MacArthur states, “Our Lord revealed nothing of himself or the facts of the gospel. He did not invite the man to believe,” (MacArthur, *Gospel*, 90). MacArthur indicates that Jesus was using the law as a means to indicate to the RYR “how far he fell short... Evangelism must measure sinners against the perfect law of God so that they can see their deficiency” (MacArthur, *Gospel*, 91). So far, so good. MacArthur does a commendable job in describing the proper function of the law, but then he “turns around and calls this the gospel, as if the man could have been saved by following Jesus’ instructions.” (Rick Ritchie, “The Law According to Jesus” in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992], 76). According to MacArthur the real problem was not that the RYR did not keep the law at all and should have fled to Christ; “the problem was that he did not keep the law enough and, therefore, should have sold his possessions.” (Michael Horton “Introduction: Don’t Judge a Book by its Cover” in *Christ the Lord*, 46-47.) It is of note that Horton is here contrasting MacArthur’s exegesis with that of John Calvin as expressed in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John Martin seems to come to a similar conclusion as MacArthur. After stating that one must keep the law perfectly for eternal life and that no one can obtain eternal life by following the law, he turns around and says, “The only course of action left to an individual is to follow Jesus in order to obtain eternal life.” (“Luke” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* ed. By John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], II New Testament Edition, 250.) James Montgomery Boice states, “The rich young man was unwilling to give up his possessions. He loved them more than he loved Jesus, and he could not be saved without loving God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength” (*Christ’s Call to Discipleship*, 152). Thus Boice believes that the keeping of the first and greatest commandment (Matt 22:38) is required for eternal life. Glasscock comments, “Unquestionably, to make keeping the commandments a requirement for eternal life would be considered heresy” (Glasscock, 390).

¹³Chantry, 47; See also William Hendriksen, *The New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 396. He believes the commands of Jesus are the equivalent of “trust completely in Me.” Bock also, *Luke*, 1482.

¹⁴Louis Barbieri, *Mark Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 227, 228; Lane, 367; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* New American

In their view, it is generally acknowledged that the command given to the rich young ruler for obtaining eternal life is a special command not enjoined upon all. Jesus may alter the demand, depending upon what sin is most binding upon the person.¹⁴ What is held in common, according to this view, is the need for wholehearted commitment to Christ, that of giving Him first place and being willing to forsake sin.¹⁵ The demand is costly, to be sure, but the reward of eternal life is worth the cost and necessary to enjoin upon the sinner, lest he get the impression that God encourages antinomianism in His eternal kingdom.

The meeting of such stringent requirements for committed discipleship, although humanly impossible because of an inherited sin nature, is presumed to be doable because of the grace of God which enables one to accomplish what the rich young ruler was incapable of doing.¹⁶ Proponents of the above view shun the notion that Jesus was requiring sinless perfection or that a decision for Christ will result in a fully righteous life with no room for growth or occasional capitulation to sinful desire.¹⁷ It is not perfection, but direction towards maturity that

Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 299; Boice, 82; Lescelius, 108.

¹⁵Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 491. He uses the term “wholeheartedness” to describe the response called for by Jesus. Hagner uses the terms “absolute commitment” and “total uninhibited commitment” (Hagner, 558).

¹⁶MacArthur, 95: “Furthermore, repentance and submission are no more human works than faith itself. They are every bit the work of God—essential aspects of God’s work in a believing heart.” The introduction of the concept of grace (i.e., the work of God) allegedly provides protection from the charge that those who advocate this point of view are teaching salvation by works. Those who advocate grace producing the works that discipleship demands are vociferous in their denial that they are teaching salvation by works. Genuine faith will produce commitment. For instance, Morris, after acknowledging the need for “wholeheartedness” states, “This does not mean that getting into heaven is a matter of rewards for meritorious acts” (Morris, 492). Bock, however, calls eternal life a “reward.” (“A Review of *The Gospel According to Jesus*,” *BibSac* 146 [January-March 1989], 28.) A reward, as Morris correctly understands, is merited or earned. Cf. Romans 4:4-5.

¹⁷MacArthur, 95.

¹⁸MacArthur, 94. But see Ryrie’s comment on *willingness* in Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 179.

¹⁹Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland,

is important. Perfect keeping of the commandments and the demands of discipleship is not enjoined, but *willingness* to follow Jesus, whatever the cost.¹⁸

II. THE VIEW THAT JESUS DEMANDED PERFECTION OF THE RICH YOUNG RULER

In contrast, I believe that Jesus asked something of the rich young ruler that was absolutely impossible, because He was requiring perfection. Theoretically there are two ways to gain eternal life. One way is to earn that life by good works. The other is to receive it as a gift. The first option is impossible to achieve, since it would involve keeping the law continuously and perfectly, something that no sinful son of Adam could possibly do. The second option is possible since it involves a humble trust in God to provide in Christ what man cannot provide for himself—the perfect righteousness necessary for entrance into the kingdom. That man should be required only to believe for initial and ultimate salvation is indeed good news (Rom 1:16; 4:5).

This does not mean that good works are not to be expected between the two points of regeneration and resurrection. Man is saved for good works (Eph 2:10) and will give evidence of good works at the judgment (Matt 25:34-40; John 5:29) as a result of God's working in his life (Phil 2:13), but neither law-keeping nor radical discipleship is ultimately a requirement for salvation under grace.

A. KINGDOM ENTRANCE CONDITIONED UPON CHILDLIKE FAITH AND HUMILITY (MATT 19:13-15; MARK 10:13-16; LUKE 18:15-17)

The first clue that Jesus is not giving the RYR the gospel is found in the incident that takes place immediately prior to the coming of the RYR to Jesus. In the preceding context in all three Synoptic Gospels, kingdom entrance is conditioned on childlike receptivity, trust, and

OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 225-26. Caird identifies childlikeness with "receptivity" (G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* [New York: The Seabury

humility (Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17).¹⁹ One must receive the kingdom as a little child or he will not be permitted to enter it (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17).

There is a jarring contrast between the childlike way into the kingdom as described to the disciples and the way of entrance into the kingdom as prescribed to the RYR. In his play *King Richard II*, Shakespeare pictures the king in his lonely dungeon cell contemplating his inscrutable fate. One of the issues that remains unresolved in his mind is the difference between the way the Lord dealt with the children and the way He dealt with the RYR.

Press, 1963], 204). Walter W. Wessel quotes with approval Rawlinson who agrees basically with Caird that the kingdom must be received as an undeserved gift from God. That is, the childlikeness Jesus emphasizes is one of receptivity to that which is offered and a dependency on the provision of others (“Mark” *Expositors Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 8:713). Rawlinson, however, downplays (denies?) the aspect of humility as a childlike quality although others such as Carson (422) and Summers do not. (Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* [Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1972], 212.) Note, particularly, Matt 18:3, 4 where childlikeness is definitely associated with humility. Trust (or receptivity) go together with humility. One humbles himself by realizing he must depend upon another for entrance into the kingdom. It is interesting that just prior to the account of the little children in Luke, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is told by Jesus (Luke 18:9-14). The contrast was between one who pridefully professed to be close to God and one who humbly cried out to God for mercy, admitting he was an undeserving sinner. It was the sinner, not the Pharisee who went home justified. Following this parable are recorded two real life situations where the contrast is repeated. The childlike might be said to be justified because they were humble, but the RYR was not because he was too self-confident. The childlike have no accumulated merit (18:9-14), no sense of greatness or self-sufficiency (18:15-17), no confidence in riches nor self-righteousness (18:18-30). If they depend upon God to provide what they cannot provide for themselves, their salvation is possible (18:27).

²⁰“King Richard II,” *The Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., n.d.), 380.

²¹Walter Lowrie, *Jesus According to St. Mark* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1929), 383. The author identifies the difference between the

For no thought is contended. The better sort,
 As thoughts of things divine, are intermix'd
 With scruples and do set the word against itself
 Against the word:
 As thus, "Come, little ones," and then again,
 "It is as hard to come as for a camel
 To thread the postern of a small needle's eye."²⁰

Walter Lowrie calls attention to the "deep dissonance" between the two accounts by observing, "A good man who has kept all the commandments from his youth but shrinks from the extremest act of heroism cannot enter where the children go so easily."²¹ Such tension evaporates, however, when the interpreter recognizes that both messages cannot possibly be the gospel.

The second clue the RYR did not hear the gospel is provided in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee is self-congratulatory, as is the rich young ruler. He has confidence in his own righteousness. The tax collector, on the other hand, acknowledges his sin, deeming himself to be unworthy in God's presence. He simply and humbly pleads for mercy. For this he is justified before God, whereas the Pharisee is not. Jesus contrasts the Pharisee's self-righteous pride with the tax collector's humility (v 14). The Pharisee needs a knowledge of sin that only an honest look at the law can give. As long as the Pharisee thinks God accepts him, he cannot receive the good news that his acceptance is secured.

B. KINGDOM ENTRANCE CONDITIONED UPON PERFECTION (MATT 19:16-22; MARK 10:17-22; LUKE 18:18-23)

In the account of the RYR, we see that Jesus was attempting to correct some faulty understandings that formed a barrier to a true understanding of the gospel message. Jesus' attempt may be properly

two accounts as one of "the contradictions of the Holy Scripture."

²²"So Jesus never did give the gospel to the young man. The entire account consists of Jesus exposing the youth's sinfulness... Jesus never got to the stage of evangelism. He remained at the 'pre-evangelism' stage of making the young man face his sinfulness." (Keith A. Shearer, "Implications on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone for Evangelistic Terminology," Unpublished M.

described then as pre-evangelism. Until these barriers were removed, there was no sense in giving the RYR the gospel. As far as we know from the text, the RYR never made it past these barriers.²²

The first misunderstanding relates to the RYR's concept of goodness; the second to his view of Jesus; the third to who he was in the sight of a holy God; and the fourth to what was required for obtaining or inheriting eternal life.

1. Misunderstanding goodness.

The RYR approached with a salutation and a question that contained the word "good." He addressed Jesus as "*Good* [Mark, Luke] Master." He asked, "What *good* [Matt] thing shall I do, that I may obtain [Matt] (or: inherit [Mark, Luke]) eternal life?"²³ The young man does not define the word "good," but Jesus, who can plumb the depths of the human heart knew that he was using it in a casual manner, perhaps in thoughtless flattery which would expect a congratulatory reply in kind.²⁴ This explains why Jesus asked why the RYR applied the word "good," to Him. Although this was a scripturally sanctioned term that could conceivably be used to describe people in a relative sense,²⁵ it

Div. Thesis: Grace Theological Seminary [May 1983], 86.) Also, Gordon Franz, "Greatest Fish Stories Ever Told" Unpublished paper (September 1992), 7-8.

²³Archer, 330.

²⁴"...in addressing him as 'Good Teacher' the ruler is engaged in a word game deeply rooted in concerns with status. According to this linguistic system, one commendation deserves another." (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997], 655.)

²⁵Used in Judaism of a good person. See Prov 12:2; 14:14; T. Sim. 4:4; T. Dan. 1:4; T. Asher 4:1; b. *Ta'an.* 24b; Matt 12:35=Luke 6:45; 1:6-7 (Bock, 1476).

²⁶"True goodness belongs to God, as the OT testifies (Pss. 106:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1; 1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 5:13)." (I. Howard Marshall *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1978], 684.) "One of the titles given God in Jewish writing was: "The Good One of the world." (J. W. Shephard, *The Christ of the Gospels: An Exegetical Study* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans

was most appropriately used for God who was the standard and source of all goodness.²⁶

Jesus reminds the RYR that this God is uniquely good. He has no peer. He is perfect (cf. 1 John 1:5) and reveals His moral perfection through His law (cf. Rom 7:12).²⁷ When one needs to know *how good one must be* to spend eternity in fellowship with a holy God, there is only one standard against which goodness can be measured: the character of God as revealed in the will of God. To be a good man, as Jesus was in the truest sense (e.g. sinless, Heb 7:26; 1 Pet 3:11; 1 John 3:5), the RYR needed to be fit to dwell with a holy God for all eternity. This required total, unequivocal, continuous, flawless, and unsullied goodness that could be tested by full conformity to God's will, that is, to His law. The RYR had sought to honor Jesus by ascribing to Him goodness, but he received a rebuke instead, because he had not thought through the full meaning of "good" for Jesus, for God, and for himself. E. Earle Ellis is correct in saying, "The man's casual use of 'good' reveals the poverty of his moral perception."²⁸

2. A misunderstanding of the person of Christ.

The RYR did indeed come to the right person to find the answer to his question regarding his eternal destiny, but he had a defective understanding of who that person was. When Jesus asked him, "Why do you call Me good?"²⁹ the RYR revealed that he thought of Jesus as

Publishing Co, 1957], 458.)

²⁷In Matt 19:17 the "good" is to be understood as a reference to the Torah... "Torah is defined as 'good' in m. 'Abot 6:2; b. Ber 28b... God has given the commandments precisely to define righteousness, and Jesus, loyal to the law, stands behind them" (Hagner, 33B:557).

²⁸E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966), 219.

²⁹Rabbis were typically not addressed as good (Marshall, 684). Only a fourth century example can be cited from the Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 24b (in H. L. Strack und P. Billerbeck 2:24f). However, David Bivin ("A Hebraic Nuance of lego: Key to Understanding Luke 18:18-19" *Jerusalem Perspective* [January/June 1994], 41) disputes this example as a direct address. While he contends that no one is ever addressed, "Good man," "Good sir," "Good teacher," or the like, he does cite examples from ancient Jewish literature, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, demonstrating that men in

just another human rabbi, albeit a particularly moral one. There is no evidence that he regarded Him as the Son of God.

Jesus is not denying His sinlessness nor His deity. The exclusivity of Jesus' claim clearly implies that every human being is sinful, including the RYR. But Jesus as a human being is not sinful, nor is He just a man, according to the New Testament. He could have legitimately accepted the RYR's accolade with this deeper understanding of goodness in mind, since He was sinless deity and since He had kept all of the Father's commandments from his youth (cf. Luke 18:21). But, He wished the young man to reflect on the way he was applying the term both to Him and the good things he supposedly thought he could perform in order to merit eternal life. Since only God has the right to be called good in the absolute sense, if the young man continued to apply that term to Christ, he could do no less than to recognize Him as God! It was essential that the RYR have some perception of Christ's supernatural nature as the Son of God in order to be saved (John 8:24; cf. Rom 10:9, 13). This Jesus did not explicitly divulge to him anywhere in the account, unless an implicit claim is recognized in Christ's command to sell all and follow Him.

3. Misunderstanding concerning himself.

The RYR's understanding of himself was also defective. He did not recognize that he was a helpless and hopeless sinner in need of a Savior. When Jesus stated that goodness was exclusively a quality of deity, "humanity's sinfulness is implicitly acknowledged."³⁰ This calls

general may be called, "good," (37, 41). Certainly the Bible does use the word "good," in a relative sense in the passages he cites, such as Prov 12:2 and Matt 5:45 and 12:35. But in the RYR pericope the term is most properly used by Jesus not to describe the general pattern of one's life, but absolute goodness.

³⁰W. D. Davis and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* vol. III (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 43. John J. Pilch, however, states that Jesus' response does not imply that humankind is evil and is simply manifesting "the cultural humility expected from anyone who is paid a compliment" ("Sickness and Healing in Luke-Acts" in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* ed. By Jerome H. Neyrey [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 189). One must ask, however, if the observance of cultural niceties is a sufficient explanation for Jesus' response in light of the subsequent context and the extent to which it depends on showing the RYR that he is not as good as he thinks he is. And,

into question whether anyone can do the good things required to please a holy God. The RYR was not fully appraised of how sinful he was in comparison to the absolutely good God from whom he wished to secure such a priceless treasure as eternal life. Until he recognized that he was spiritually bankrupt, he would not know that he could not pay the cost necessary for eternal life. We are reminded of Paul's assessment of mankind drawn from Old Testament Scripture, "There is *none* who does *good, not even one*" (Rom 3:12; see Pss 14:3 and 53:3). If no one is good, including the RYR, how can anyone possibly qualify to dwell with a holy God forever?

4. Misunderstanding the way to eternal life.

The fourth misunderstanding the young man had was in thinking he could perform something exemplary enough to ensure God's acceptance of him into His kingdom. He falsely assumed that he could merit or earn eternal life.³¹ It was a common belief that eternal life could be merited,³² and many Jews believed that a specific act of goodness could win eternal

certainly, humility for Jesus would not require anything that was a denial of His innate goodness.

³¹"Irrespective of what 'good' refers to, the man approaches Jesus with a question showing how far he is from the humble faith that, as Jesus has just finished saying, characterizes all who belong to the kingdom (vv 13-15). He wants to earn eternal life; and in the light of v 20, he apparently thinks there are good things he can do, beyond the demands of the law, by which he can assure his salvation" (Carson, "Matthew," 8:422).

³²William E. Brown, "The New Testament Concept of the Believer's Inheritance" Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984, 34-40 provides a full discussion of this common Jewish belief citing numerous Jewish sources.

³³Carson, "Matthew," 422. Carson makes reference to Strack und Billerbeck: *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, I:808ff, for specific historical examples.

³⁴Bock, *Luke*, 1478. So also John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 2:128.

³⁵The concept of eternal life that the RYR held was no doubt one reflected in current Jewish thought. Daniel 12:2 provided the concept's association

life.³³ The young man no doubt held these beliefs in common with many of his contemporaries. “If one is going to earn eternal life, then acts of righteousness are required.”³⁴ But the RYR was mistaken in thinking that a sinful person such as himself could merit the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.³⁵

III. JESUS’ STRATEGY IN DEALING WITH THE RYR’S FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

Jesus could have used a frontal approach by lecturing the RYR on the four misconceptions that were obstructing his entrance into the kingdom. Instead, He used a more subtle approach—one intended to promote self-discovery. He raised two questions regarding the use of the word “good,” with regard to His own person and the nature of goodness itself. His strategy was to show that the RYR was overconfident about his desire and ability to accomplish something good enough to earn eternal life.

If God is absolutely good, so is His will that flows from His very nature. Therefore, Jesus directs the young man to the commandments, since they define what is good. He is especially clear about what is required to obtain eternal life, “You know the commandments [Mark, Luke];³⁶ keep them [Matt].”³⁷

Theoretically, a man could inherit eternal life by keeping the law

with the resurrection of the dead in contrast to eternal punishment (cf. Matt 18:8; 25:41). See Rudolph Bultmann, “*zaō*” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. By Gerhard Kittel in German, trans. And ed. By Geoffrey W. Bromiley in English (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 2:856-57.

³⁶“You know the commandments’ (*entolē*, 1:6) is tantamount to an injunction to obey them” (Marshall, 684-85).

³⁷Archer, 300.

³⁸Walter C. Kaiser, (“The Law as God’s Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness” *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. By Wayne G. Strickland [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993], 190) disputes this. Kaiser is answered by Douglas Moo on 219.

³⁹“Perfect obedience to his law is the only condition upon which God will give any man eternal life (Matt 19:17). As Luther said, ‘The law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned

(cf. Luke 10:28; Rom 10:5).³⁸ However, the requirement for keeping the law involved no less than perfect obedience.³⁹ To be saved by the law one would have to keep it continuously without interruption. And there were no exceptions—it applied to everyone. As Gal 3:10 says, “Cursed is *everyone* who does not *continue* to do *everything* written in the book of the law.” That is why Paul concludes, “Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because ‘the righteous will live by faith’” (3:11).

“The reason for the Lord’s answer was to make the young man, and those around who could hear, understand that no one is capable of earning eternal life.”⁴⁰ But the RYR did not know this yet, even after Jesus told him of his sinfulness.

The young man, referring to the commandments, asks, “Which ones?”⁴¹ Unsatisfied, he still believes he can do something to earn eternal life. Jesus answers him *as though his assumption were true*—that he can do something good enough to merit entrance into the kingdom.

What Jesus does next is to focus on the young man’s conscience to

without hope.” John Robbins, (“Ethics and Justification by Faith Alone,” by John Robbins. *The Trinity Review*, No. 127 [Sept 1995], 3.) One can imagine Martin Luther rolling over in his grave if he were to hear Donald Hagner’s comment: “The discipleship of the kingdom is not *simply* a matter of obeying commandments; it requires an absolute commitment. . . .” (Hagner, 558, italics mine). Luther had about as much internal commitment that an unsaved man could have, but realized in great frustration that his keeping of God’s law was anything but simply and easily accomplished even in its external form.

⁴⁰Ed Glasscock, *Matthew* in Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 390.

⁴¹“The man is not satisfied. Perhaps he knows the rabbinic debates about the weightier matters of the law or about how to sum up the law in a commandment or two. Perhaps he is looking for a loophole to avoid obeying certain less desirable commands” (Blomberg, 297). A parallel account in Luke 10 shows that a lawyer used a question to hedge on his responsibility to love his neighbor after Jesus told him this commandment was necessary for eternal life (v 27). On the other hand the RYR may be giving Jesus a challenge to name a commandment he has not kept!

⁴²Most mss. in Mark include “Do not defraud.” Archer omits the command “Do not defraud” from the list of commandments given to the RYR. While some manuscripts do indeed omit this prohibition, the standard printed Greek

awaken it to the fact that the avenue of law-keeping for eternal life is closed for him because the standards are too high. He tests the RYR's claim to be capable of doing something worthy enough to earn eternal life. He moves from enjoining obedience to the commandments in general to specifying particular commandments in the second table of the law. "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother."⁴² In Matthew, Jesus concludes by saying, "and, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love of neighbor is the summary statement encompassing the commandments in the second part of the Decalogue.⁴³ As Paul later comments, "He who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8).

So far the young man had learned nothing new. Rabbinic theology had taught him that the keeping of the commands of the Torah, controlling the evil impulse by the good, was "the prerequisite for

texts such as Nestle and UBS retain *Mē apostrepēsēs* as the preferred reading. The UBS textual apparatus does indicate that there is significant doubt as to whether the preferred reading or the reading in the apparatus is the superior one. If the command is part of the original text, it is usually regarded by commentators as a variation on the commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," or possibly a substitute for the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." See C. S. Mann, *Mark* in the Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 400; C. Marvin Pate, *Luke* in Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 226; Cranfield, 329; Hendriksen, 393. The basic rationale for coveting is "fraud being a manifestation of coveting" (Wessel, 715). However, stealing can be a form of fraud and may have particular relevance to a man of wealth as well. Osborne prefers believing that the command "provided a general summary of four negative commandments of the second table" (Osborne, 293).

⁴³Robert L. Thomas "The Rich Young Man in Matthew" *Grace Theological Journal* 3:2 (Fall 1982), 257.

⁴⁴Walter Grundmann, "*agathōs*," TDNT, 2:15.

⁴⁵Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 225.

⁴⁶Archer, 330.

⁴⁷Bock, 1480.

⁴⁸Zane C. Hodges *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 185.

⁴⁹Swete, 225.

participation in the life of the future world.”⁴⁴

The young man replies with a sense of self-satisfaction and relief that he has wholly kept the commandments. “If the eternal inheritance could be secured on so simple a condition as keeping of the Decalogue, it was his already.”⁴⁵ “All these I have kept, [Mark, Luke] from my youth up”⁴⁶—that is, from the age of accountability, his early teen years.⁴⁷ This assertion is framed as a statement of *absolute compliance*. The language is perfectionistic in tone and does not allow for admission of failure. “The young man’s response is easily the most self-righteous boast to be found anywhere in the New Testament...how readily this man might have joined in the prayer of the Pharisee, ‘God I thank you that I am not like other men.’”⁴⁸ But indeed he was like other men. He was not the “good” man he boasted to be.

At this point the RYR still doesn’t get it! He is a sinner. There is none good but God. He is oblivious to his depravity. As Swete has said, “The deeper meaning and larger requirements of the Law were yet hidden from him.”⁴⁹ By comparison with others, the RYR must surely have been among the cream of the crop in his attendance to moral duty; yet, how could a holy God accept his flawed righteousness to grant eternal life with Himself? Would such a God give perfection in the resurrection for imperfection during this life?⁵⁰

“What do I still lack?” he asked. Jesus could have cited numerous situations in the young man’s life where he had failed in thought, word, or deed to carry out each of the commandments He had cited. Still assuming, for the sake of argument, that the young man was correct in his assessment, He zeroed in on an area of weakness that would prove to be a fatal stab wound to his conscience, shattering the self-assured

⁵⁰The RYR no doubt agreed with contemporary Jewish understanding of the future life: “...the eschatological life is regarded as a life without sin” (Bultmann, 2:857).

⁵¹See Archer, 230.

⁵²Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* trans by F. H. and C. H. Cave from the German (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 127.

⁵³Davies and Allison, 48. While admitting the view of some ancient Jews that this word refers to sinlessness, for which they cite numerous ancient Jewish sources, the authors dismiss such a possibility. However, they do not give adequate reason for doing so in light of the context. This term must be understood in light of the way Jesus has used the word “good,” as perfection

myth that he had kept the law. Jesus advised the RYR:

If you wish to be *perfect* (*ei theleis telios einai*; cf. V. 17: *ei de theleis eis tēn zōēn eiselthein*) [Matt], go [Matt, Mark] and sell all the possessions [Matt] you have, and give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come and follow Me.⁵¹

Perfection then is the standard necessary for obtaining eternal life. As Jeremias notes:

In later Judaism the basic meaning of “perfect” was “fully righteous,” one who keeps the whole Torah...It follows then that according to Jesus’ view, to give all one’s possessions for the poor is part of the complete fulfillment of the law.⁵²

It was not uncommon for many Jews of Jesus’ day to assume that they were *sinless* in their complete keeping of the law.⁵³ Strack und Billerbeck notes:

“That man possesses the ability to fulfill the Commandments of God perfectly was so firmly believed by the Rabbis, that they spoke in all seriousness of people who had kept the whole Law from A to Z.”⁵⁴

The RYR believed he had surely attained this state. But he was still unaware of how far short he came of the perfect goodness of God. at the very outset of the conversation. Davies and Allison settle for “complete” as the meaning of the word, *teleios*, in this context.

⁵⁴Strack und Billerbeck, 1:814. Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896), 423: “That it was possible to keep the whole law is an idea which is frequent in the Talmud. Abraham, Moses, and Aaron were held to have done so. R. Chanina says to the Angel of Death, “Bring me the book of the Law and see whether there is anything written in it which I have not kept” (Schoettg. I, pp. 160-61).”

⁵⁵“Almsgiving and discipleship will make the man ‘perfect’ (*telios*), completely whole or mature (as in 5:48), and he will receive the promise of eternal life which he requested, described here as ‘treasure in heaven’ (cf. 6:20)” (Blomberg, 298). The meeting of these conditions is possible with the reception of a regenerate heart (300). Thus Blomberg seems to be saying that maturity presupposes external compliance that, in turn, presupposes a regenerated heart given as God’s gift. That almsgiving and discipleship in a mature sense is doable and expected for a true believer is not in question. The

Some take the word “perfect” to mean “mature” or “complete.”⁵⁵ Their implication is that Jesus was calling the RYR to mature discipleship which would allow for some failings. But the word should be defined primarily by its context; here Jesus is setting before the RYR the standard of absolute goodness which belongs only to God and is necessary to enter the kingdom. The only other time the word appears in Matthew is in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus states, “Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt 5:48). The standard of perfect love in that context is measured by the holy character of the Father. For the saved, this serves as an *ideal* to indeed strive for; but, it is *unattainable* in the sense described here, since it requires one to be as good as God. That is why the Sermon on the Mount is useful not only in instructing saved disciples, but also in helping the lost to see their need of a righteousness higher than their own in order to be saved (cf. Matt 5:20).

At this point Jesus could have told the RYR that what he truly lacked was childlike faith (Luke 18:17). He could have said that he lacked a dependence on God’s mercy which would bring about justification (18:13-14). However, his degree of self-righteous deception disqualified him from receiving such a straightforward answer. Regarding the commandments Cranfield says:

“They are the answer to the question about eternal life, not because a man can keep them and so have eternal life, but because, if he honestly tries to keep them, he will be brought to recognize his bankruptcy and prepared to receive the kingdom of God as a little child.”⁵⁶

“If it is a command of perfection you desire,⁵⁷ if it is a heroic act you require, then here it is.” Jesus says, “You do lack one thing [Mark, question is, “Can this level of maturity even begin to meet the stringent holy demands of the law for eternal life?”

⁵⁶Cranfield, 328.

⁵⁷“The Romanists have erred here in their teaching of supererogatory goodness, with the teaching of the peculiar merit of voluntary property. They have regarded the teaching as counsel, but in the text it is a command.” S. Lewis Johnson “The Rich Young Ruler or Salvation the Gift of God” *Matthew: Lesson 63* (Dallas: Believers Chapel, April 24, 1977), 4. See also Davies, 47.

⁵⁸Glasscock, 392.

⁵⁹Herman Ridderbos *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. By H. deJongste, ed. By Raymond O. Zorn (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962), 293.

⁶⁰Ellis, 219. There is a parallel account in the Latin version of Origen on

Luke]; if you wish to be perfect [Matt], *go* [Matt, Mark] and *sell* all the possessions [Matt] you have, and *give* them out to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, And *come* and *follow* Me.”

Sensing for the first time that the way of salvation in which he was trusting was too hard for him, the young man became downcast and left very grieved “for he was one who had great possessions” (Mark 10:22). The command to perfection became a command of despair! “Having come to seek praise from this notable teacher because of his law-keeping, the young ruler left having been informed of some things he could not or would not do.”⁵⁸ His quest that began with eagerness now ended in sorrow.

Jesus’ requirement for the RYR did not go beyond the law; His words were actually a fulfillment of it.⁵⁹ To relinquish one’s desire for that which God had seen fit to withhold was to keep the one commandment Jesus had not heretofore mentioned, “Thou shalt not covet,” a part of the second table of the law which dealt with loving one’s neighbor as oneself.⁶⁰ This commandment was the only part of the second table that put the emphasis on internal righteousness, on the motive and not the external act. Hence, Jesus *tested* him on his perfect obedience to the commandment, “Thou shalt not covet.” Jesus knew beforehand that he would fail the test.

Not only did the RYR violate the second table of the law, but he violated the first and greatest commandment, “Love the Lord your God

Matthew (Now called Pseudo-Origen) that shows Jesus specifically connecting the RYR’s failure to give to the poor with failure to love one’s neighbor as oneself. *The Apocryphal New Testament* trans. By Montague Rhodes James (London: Oxford, 1924), 6.

⁶¹Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 83. Cf. Matt 6:24.

⁶²“By asking the man to follow him in radical discipleship, Jesus probes this man’s whole-hearted love for God and self-giving love for neighbor. If one is not willing to follow Jesus in radical discipleship, then one does not love God with all one’s heart, mind, and soul, and strength” (Thomas R. Schreiner *The Law & Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993], 233). It is interesting to compare the command to “go, sell, give, come, and follow” with Luke 10:25-28. There a lawyer asked the same question the RYR asked. Jesus set before him the twofold command of

with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). Covetousness is a form of idolatry (Col 3:5). “He [the RYR] worshipped the god of money as well as the God of Israel (Exod 20:3). He certainly did not love the Lord with all his heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5). His love of possessions kept him from a total love for the Lord.”⁶¹ The RYR made his decision in violation of the law in both love of neighbor and love of God (cf. 1 John 4:20).⁶²

It has been argued that Jesus went beyond the law in requiring the RYR to love his neighbor more than himself, rather than himself.⁶³ But if one loves himself the way God intends, then he will desire for himself what God intends him to have. If he loves his neighbor, he will desire for them what God desires for them, as though it were for himself. In other words, love for neighbor is defined by the will of God. Jesus as God [or God’s representative] reveals His specific will for the RYR; it is not necessarily incumbent on all rich men, but obligatory for this one because of his special need.

Also included in Jesus’ specific application of the first great commandment is a challenge to follow Him in radical discipleship,

the law to love God supremely and one’s neighbor as himself. Jesus is basically asking the same of the RYR. The story of the Good Samaritan given to the lawyer was to test him on how well he loved his neighbor. He pointed out that one’s enemies were included in the definition of a neighbor and he was to be a neighbor to them. Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” When Jesus gives His command to the RYR He is saying the same thing: “Do this and you will live.” He is asking the same impossible thing from him in applying the law as He did the lawyer. See William D. Lawrence, “The New Testament Doctrine of the Lordship of Christ,” Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968, 109.

⁶³Govett, 129.

⁶⁴Archer, 330.

⁶⁵Some relate the word “treasure” to something beyond eternal life. See Fitzmyer, 1200; also Bock: “This treasure is fullness of blessing associated with eternal life and comes in this age and the next. The treasure contains ‘the gifts’ that accompany eternal life” (Bock, 1481); see Luke 14:13, 14; and especially Luke 12:33, 34 (=Matt 6:19-21) where the word “treasure” is referring to rewards. In teaching that is applicable to believers, “treasure” is an appropriate designation of rewards in addition to eternal life. In the RYR pericope it need not be taken that way. The whole passage is dominated by a discussion of salvation, not rewards. Note the four different phrases in Matthew 19, for instance, to express

a discipleship that imitates Christ in the sinless keeping of the law. The invitation to such a discipleship is included in the answer to the question, “What good [Matt] thing shall I do, that I may obtain [Matt] (or inherit [Mark, Luke]) eternal life?”⁶⁴ It is more than one heroic act. It is *lifelong sacrificial* discipleship. Assuming this kind of discipleship is an application of the law, it would mean that once the treasure of eternal life⁶⁵ was secured, it could also be lost. Disciples have been known to defect (John 6:66). For successful obedience to the law to culminate in eternal life, it must be *continuous*. To fail at any point of keeping the law is to be guilty of *all* (James 2:10) and the RYR would come under the curse (Gal 3:10). Unless the RYR *flawlessly* followed *all* that Jesus taught by His precept and example, he would be doomed. *Assuming* that the RYR’s premise was correct (which Jesus does for the sake of argument), that he could do something good enough to merit eternal life, this is what would be required.

Discipleship demands are normally delivered to believers who are given the spiritual equipment to produce at a very high level of performance. Nevertheless, God does not eradicate their sin nature upon believing (1 John 1:8-10). In this story, discipleship demands are given to an unbeliever from whom is expected perfection. Even if he were required to be *willing* to turn from the sin of covetousness, it could be measured only by continuous perfection from that moment on. Also, how could this effort add to the perfect righteousness of God

this singular idea of salvation: “obtain eternal life” (v 16); enter into life (v 17); enter the Kingdom (vv 23, 24), and be saved (v 25). Would Jesus be likely to introduce the subject of rewards to an unsaved man asking how he might earn eternal life, if he is not even prepared to accept the gospel of grace?

⁶⁶Bock, 1485-86. “The Babylonian Talmud included a rabbinical saying that not even in a dream does a man see an elephant going through a needle’s eye!” (Summers, 216). The point is that such imagery is impossible to conceive even in a realm where most anything can happen in contrast to real life. The elephant, the largest animal in Babylon, served the imagery of impossibility well. See John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint of 1859 ed.), 2:264-65. In the Koran (*Sura vii*. 38) it states, “The wicked find the gate of heaven shut ‘till the camel shall pass through the eye of a needle” Jack Lewis *The Gospel According to Matthew Part II: 13:53–28:20* Living Word Commentary

that would be provided for him if he would only believe?

IV. KINGDOM ENTRANCE IMPOSSIBLE THROUGH HUMAN EFFORT

After the RYR leaves, Jesus turns His attention to the disciples to teach them that entrance into the kingdom is not just difficult, but impossible by human effort: Three things indicate this is so. First, the illustration of a camel going through a needle's eye demonstrates impossibility. To think of the largest of animals in Palestine passing through the smallest of openings is a manifest absurdity. "The point... is clear: it is impossible for rich people on their own strength to gain entry into the kingdom (Michel, TDNT 3:592-94)."⁶⁶ Second, the disciples sensed Jesus' words described an impossibility, not just a difficulty. Their shock at what Jesus said is inexplicable otherwise.⁶⁷ "The implied thought is, 'If even the rich (whose prosperity is generally regarded as a sign of blessing) cannot enter the kingdom, how can anybody else enter

(Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 1984), 2:72. The point is that the gate of heaven will forever be shut; it will be impossible to get in. For further discussion on historical attempts to make the figure less jarring in its effect see Fitzmyer, 1204. Hagner takes the figure as rhetorically hyperbolic. According to him it is not necessary to see here a literal impossibility, only exceptional difficulty (Hagner, 561). This, however, does not square with Matt 19:26, Mark 10:27, and Luke 18:27 where Jesus clearly speaks of impossibility.

⁶⁷Bock, 1485. Mark uses a word in 10:24 to note the amazement of the disciples (*ethaubounto*) upon hearing the difficulty of entering, but the words used in 10:26 after hearing how difficult [i.e. impossible] indicates a higher sense of amazement (*perissōs exēplēsonto* meaning "were more amazed than ever") indicating shock or being astounded (See Mann, 402); in the parallel verse in Matt 19:25 *exēplēsonto* is combined with *sphodra* ("exceedingly or greatly").

⁶⁸Marshall, 688. "[The disciples] shared the common view of the time that riches were a sign of God's blessing (together with the righteousness of the blessed; cf. Deut 28:1-14) and provided the possibility of both deeds of charity (almsgiving) and leisure for the study of the Torah and the pursuit of righteousness" (Hagner, 561). Seeing wealth as a sign of God's blessing for righteousness had some support in passages such as Deut 8:1-10; 26:1-9;

it?”⁶⁸ Or, to put it another way, “If such a person cannot succeed in entering the kingdom, what hope have lesser persons?”⁶⁹ The disciples were startled and shocked to discover that the man they expected to enter the kingdom would not make it. Third, Jesus’ concluding statement is determinative, “With men this is *impossible*, but all things [Matt, Mark] are possible with God.” In Matthew we see a climactic progression: 1) the salvation of rich men is difficult (an example of understatement); 2) the salvation of rich men is as possible as a camel going through the eye of a needle (a strong figure of speech declaring impossibility); 3) the salvation of all men, not just rich men is impossible (a clear declaration of and an expanded application of impossibility).

“The disciples understood that the Lord was saying that it is impossible for anyone who trusts in riches to enter the kingdom—unless God intervenes and offers a way of salvation that is unrelated to human resources and abilities.”⁷⁰

In the final analysis, it was *impossible* for *anyone*, not just a rich man to be saved by his own effort. The object of Jesus’ lesson is that man can’t save himself by giving God first place or by wholeheartedness

28:12-14; Prov 6:6-11; 10:4; 28:19. But it was not consistently associated with God’s blessing as Ps 73:12; Prov 28:6; 30:7-9; Jer 5:28; Amos 8:4-8; and Mic 2:1-5 bear out. The disciples were selective, like many today, in their application of Scripture.

⁶⁹William Hersey Davis, *Davis’ Notes on Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 75.

⁷⁰Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 86. If the reading of the Majority Text is correct in Mark 10:24 and the phrase “for those who trust in riches” is a part of the original text, then it is even clearer that Jesus is focusing on riches as the object of one’s trust and that this was the real obstacle to entering the kingdom. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to pay for all sin on the cross. Since all sin would be paid for, the only sin, practically speaking, that would stand between men and God would be the sin of unbelief (John 3:18; 16:9). It is this sin that must be repented of. Hence, the RYR was to repent of his sin of unbelief with regard to trust in riches along with belief in the four misconceptions mentioned in this paper and place his trust completely in Christ. He then would be receiving the kingdom as a little child by simple trust born of humility. Ultimately the “one thing” lacking was humble faith in Christ.

⁷¹As Keita Takagi has observed, the problem of the RYR was not ultimately failing to give up material possessions, but *pride*. His pride assumes a self-sufficient attitude that his riches and rigid observance of the law promoted.

as a disciples. He is incapable. Even with grace, he is not capable of consistently giving God first place, since Jesus' requirement is lifelong perfection.

With God, however, all things are possible, even the salvation of the rich. But they must relinquish their pride of accomplishment and accumulation that brought them a false sense of security and place their trust in Jesus Christ alone who can provide sufficient righteousness for them to be saved.⁷¹ The righteousness the RYR could produce was both insufficient and unnecessary. It was insufficient in that he could not produce enough, even with accompanying grace, to permanently give up his wealth and follow Jesus in wholehearted service. It was unnecessary because in a few days Jesus would make a payment for sin so great in its provision of righteousness that the RYR would not need to fulfill the radical discipleship Jesus required of him.

If only the RYR had confessed his failure and simply cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" He would have been told, as the apostle Paul told the Philippian jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Some might say, "You mean that's all you have to do?" To whom the reply would be, "That's all you can do" because it is impossible any other way.

V. KINGDOM REWARDS ARE FOR THE SAVED

The real issue is whether he will trust in himself or in God who alone can save. "The Rich Young Ruler" in *Basic Theology Applied: A Practical Application of Basic Theology in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie and His Work* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 188-89.

⁷²Clifton L. Fowler, "Our All for the Kingdom," *Grace and Truth* 12:2 (February 1934), 66.

⁷³Siegfried Goebel, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. By Professor Banks, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913), 300.

⁷⁴Brown, 75, gives several reasons for this interpretation as an alternative to the view that eternal life is an earned reward. Those who earn rewards are among those who freely inherit eternal life, but eternal life itself is not a reward. The RYR had asked Jesus how he might inherit eternal life and Jesus indicated to him that it could not be achieved as a reward. One could not work for it. If that is true, then Jesus' answer to Peter regarding the inheritance of eternal life (Matt 19:29) cannot be seen as teaching eternal life is a reward

The disciples were no doubt relieved to be reminded of the grace of God which provides salvation as a free gift (cf. Eph 2:8-9). But the fact remained that Peter and the apostles had done exactly what the RYR had not done. They had left everything. Their sacrifice, however, was made not in order to be saved, but because they were already saved. Peter was reminded of that fact, but a new thought came to his mind. He reasoned that if salvation is not earned because God freely bestows it, what compensation will he and the other disciples' have in the future? "If salvation is free, why are we working so hard and doing without? What's in it for us?" (Matt 19:27; Mark 10:29-31; Luke 18:28)⁷² It is here that Jesus introduces a gracious promise of rewards, in spite of Peter's bargaining spirit; but, He also issues a warning that the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matt 19:28-30; 20:16; Mark 10:29-31; Luke 18:29-30). The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matt 20:1-16 illustrates that God will be generous in giving rewards to those who don't bargain for them (see vv 13-15).

Peter is not looking for assurance of salvation—but for further compensation *in addition to* salvation. Jesus grants him his assurance in His promise of rewards both for here and hereafter. With the mention of eternal life in connection with rewards, He is simply giving Peter a promise that one gets all of this, rewards and heaven too. Rewards are being promised "in addition" to eternal life (Matt 19:29; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30),⁷³ but eternal life itself is not a part of the reward.⁷⁴

VI. CONCLUSION

The RYR did not hear the gospel according to Jesus. Jesus was holding him up to the perfect standard of the law as a test throughout, unless the eternal life spoken of by the RYR is different from the eternal life Jesus speaks of to Peter.

⁷⁵Although W. E. Bell of Dallas Baptist University is an advocate of Lordship Salvation and directs his comments in defense of that issue, his following comments are perceptive as far as insisting the continuity of the passage be recognized: "The passage [concerning the RYR] has to do with salvation—not a second-step 'discipleship' decision. This is unmistakably clear from the young man's original question, 'What must I do that I may inherit eternal life (v 17); from Jesus' response, 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!' (v 23); and the disciples' response, 'Who then can be saved?' (v 26). Yet Jesus' demands included, 'Come, take up the cross, and follow Me' (v 21). According to the two-step agenda, Jesus' answer clearly fell into the 'discipleship' category—not the salvation area.

not as a standard that He actually expected the RYR to meet. Jesus did not break His stride in the midst of His drive to expose the RYR's sinfulness to explain how one can be saved by grace, how one can demonstrate he is saved, or how to obtain rewards. That would be answering a question that the RYR was not asking. The question was essentially, "How may I earn eternal life?" From start to finish Jesus sticks with the same theme of how one might obtain eternal life by that means.⁷⁵ The RYR had approached Jesus with a question that expected a meritorious answer and Jesus did not disappoint him. He was to keep the "good" commandments given by the absolutely "good" God in a sinless manner, a manner that would qualify him to dwell forever in fellowship with a holy God. Are we somehow to believe that in Jesus' application of the tenth commandment and the first great commandment that the RYR received a non-meritorious command that can legitimately be called the gospel?⁷⁶

Note that Jesus does not mention faith as the condition for eternal

Why would Jesus answer a salvation question with a 'discipleship answer'? Verses 23-25 make it clear that the young man was not saved" (W. E. Bell "Some Additional Thoughts on the Lordship Question," [Unpublished paper, n.d.]) Bell's argument for consistency is well taken. However, what Bell does not recognize is that Jesus requires perfection in law keeping all the way through for eternal life including perfection in the area of a discipleship demand that complies with the first and greatest commandment of the law. He mistakenly thinks that Jesus is consistently presenting a "commitment of life" type gospel. Dr. Bell takes the words in Mark, "take up the cross," as being part of the original text. It is generally not recognized as the best reading and is not included in the UBS *The Greek New Testament* 4th rev. ed. See Thomas M. Lindsay *St. Mark's Gospel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1883), 172.

⁷⁶Thus, the following seems strange: "Jesus' promise 'You shall have treasure in heaven' refers to eternal life; and since that is a gift of God and cannot be earned, no saving merit must be attached to the action of giving all to the poor" (Walter W. Wessel, 716). But Jesus *does* attach saving merit to giving to the poor as an application of the tenth commandment! Eternal life *is* an earned reward unless one gives up law-keeping for salvation and trusts Christ alone apart from almsgiving or committed discipleship.

⁷⁷Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response* (Burlison, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 146. See pp. 144-50 for his treatment of the RYR.

⁷⁸That is, to be confirmed in righteousness as Adam might have been, had

life. He does not mention grace because there is no message of grace for those who believe they have no need of it. He is there to call a self-righteous sinner to repentance, one who needs to exchange his pride for humility and his self-sufficiency for *trust* in Someone who can do for him what he cannot do for himself. “But the ruler was not ready for the message of faith because he did not see his need.”⁷⁷

Jesus *did* require a response to His Lordship. As the Son of God, He gave the young ruler an authoritative application of the law. However, had the RYR been ready, Jesus would have called for a difference response—that of childlike trust which is a *non-meritorious* response. It is an appropriate submission to lordship under grace, since no works or promise of works are required to obtain salvation (cf. Rom 10:3). Jesus as Lord has the authority to demand faith alone in Him for eternal life.

Jesus *did* require repentance from the sin of covetousness. Such a requirement demanded compliance with the law since “sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4). *Any* commandment Jesus told the RYR to keep would automatically require a turning from the sin identified by that commandment. But, keeping the law cannot bring the righteousness needed to live with a holy God forever. Human efforts will all fall short and add nothing to the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Jesus *did* require discipleship to be saved⁷⁸ but not the usual kind that allowed for failure without loss of salvation. The discipleship He required was flawless and continual until the RYR reached the completion of his goal—that of being good enough to merit eternal life.

Because Jesus demanded *perfection* in keeping the law, this

he successfully obeyed.

requirement (which included the commands to go, sell, give, come, and follow) *automatically excluded* a commitment-of-life gospel, a call to evidence one's faith as a believer, and a call to service leading to rewards in the kingdom. It even excluded a free grace gospel, since the law's ministry is, practically speaking, one of condemnation rather than salvation.

1993], 190) disputes this. Kaiser is answered by Douglas Moo on 219.

³⁹“Perfect obedience to his law is the only condition upon which God will give any man eternal life (Matt 19:17). As Luther said, ‘The law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned without hope.’” John Robbins, (“Ethics and

