

WHEN DOING EVERYTHING RIGHT ISN'T ENOUGH

Then someone came to him and said, "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 wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 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; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:16-22).

This young man had what many people of his age seem to want—position and wealth. One day, watching Jesus' tender and affectionate interaction with children, he found growing in his heart the desire to be the Lord's disciple. The idea became so urgent that he ran after Jesus, knelt down, and earnestly asked the most important question in life: "Good Master, what can I do to have eternal life?"

Jesus responded with a challenge that probed the youth's thoughts. He replied, "Only God is good, so why do you call Me good?"

This young executive obviously lived "the good life."

He'd convinced himself that he had "made it" in both the workplace and in his spiritual life. Yet, for all that, he sensed something was missing. He had seen the way Jesus blessed children and wanted Jesus to bless him, too.

In reply to his question, Jesus told him to keep the commandments and quoted a few of them that deal with our interpersonal relationships. The young ruler replied with certainty that he'd done it all since his youth. Then he added the poignant question "What is missing?" As Jesus looked in the young man's face, He searched his life and character. He loved the youth kneeling at His feet and wanted to give him the peace he desired. So He replied, "One thing is missing. Sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. That will give you a bank account in heaven. Then pick up the cross and follow Me."³⁰

Jesus sincerely wanted this young man as one of His disciples. He knew the youth could be a tremendous influence for good. He had many fine qualifications and talents. Jesus wanted to give him the opportunity to develop a character that would reflect the likeness of God.

If the ruler had joined Jesus, he would have been a great power for good. If he'd made the choice to be a disciple, how different his life would have been.³¹

His life could have become all he wanted it to be. But one thing was missing, just one! To sell and distribute his great wealth and join Jesus would have corrected that one weakness. That action would have emptied self-interest from his life and filled it instead with the love of God. Jesus asked him to make a choice between worldly wealth and heavenly worth.

To join Jesus meant that this young man had to accept a life of self-denial. With deep interest Jesus watched him weigh the question. With keen insight the ruler understood what he'd been told, but it made him depressed. If he had sensed what he would gain in the gift Jesus offered, he would

have become a disciple. Instead, he reflected on what he would lose.³²

The man kneeling before Jesus served as an honored member of a council of the Jews, and Satan tempted him to think of the flattering prospects that position held. Yes, to be sure, this young adult did want the spiritual treasure Jesus offered. But he also wanted the advantages of his wealth. Yes, he desired eternal life. But he didn't want all that sacrifice. Finally, having thought it through, he walked away in great sadness. The cost of eternal life seemed too high.

The rich young ruler became a victim of self-deception. Even though he said otherwise, he hadn't been keeping all the commandments. He had an idol that he worshiped—his wealth. He loved his possessions more than God, the gifts more than the Giver.

Many today face the same choice. They weigh the competing claims of the spiritual world and the material world. And like the young ruler, they turn away from Jesus and say, "I can't serve this Man."³³

If only he'd been able to see beyond a life of lawkeeping to the life of true loving that Jesus offered, how different his life might have been.

The ruler had been given much so he could demonstrate generosity. It's the same today. God gives us talents and opportunities to work with Him in helping the poor and suffering. Whenever we use our gifts this way, we partner with God to win others for Christ. Those who enjoy positions of great influence and financial security may think the cost to follow Jesus is too great. But self-surrender is at the very heart of what it means to be His follower. Often this reality is expressed in language that sounds demanding, but God has no other way to save us except to separate us from whatever will ultimately destroy us.³⁴

Jesus called another wealthy man to His service who

did leave all, exchanging his lucrative business for poverty and hardship.³⁵

No one likes the “tax man.” Not today, and not in the times of Christ in Palestine. Those officials were the most reviled of all. Not only because they collected taxes (a painful reminder to the Jews of their Roman conquerors), but also because these men were dishonest. Through extortion they made themselves wealthy. And when a Jew worked for the Romans collecting taxes, he was viewed as part of the vilest segment of their society.³⁶

Matthew was one of the hated extortionists. But one day that all changed. After calling two sets of brothers by the Sea of Galilee, Peter and Andrew, then James and John, Jesus called Matthew to be His disciple. While others judged Matthew by his vocation, Jesus read his heart and recognized that it was open. Matthew had heard Jesus speak and wanted to ask for help but had convinced himself that the Great Teacher would never notice him.³⁷

Sitting at his tax desk one day, Matthew saw Jesus approaching. Moments later he was astonished to hear Jesus say, “Follow Me.” Matthew stood up from his desk, left everything as it was, turned away, and followed Jesus. He didn’t hesitate, didn’t question, didn’t give a moment’s thought to his lucrative business or the poverty he was about to receive in exchange. For Matthew, it was enough to be with Jesus, to listen to His words, and to work with Him.

It happened the same way with the brothers Jesus had just called. Peter and Andrew heard the call, dropped their nets on the beach, left their fishing boat, and walked away with Jesus. They didn’t ask how they would make a living or support their families. The call to be His disciple they found too compelling to rationalize or postpone. They simply obeyed the call and joined Jesus.

Reports of Matthew’s action created citywide interest.

And in the exuberance of his new discipleship, Matthew desperately sought to influence his former associates. So he organized a party at his house and invited relatives and friends. Those friends included not only tax collectors but also many other people of “doubtful reputation,” people strictly avoided by their more scrupulous neighbors.

But Jesus didn’t hesitate to accept the invitation, even though He knew it would offend the Jewish leaders and place Him in a dubious position in the eyes of others. With pleasure Jesus attended the dinner party, where Matthew seated Him at the head table surrounded by dishonest tax collectors.³⁸

During the party some rabbis tried to turn the new disciples against their new Master by asking, “Why does your Master eat with tax men and sinners?” Jesus overheard the question, and before His disciples could answer He challenged the rabbis with the words: “Healthy people don’t go to the doctor, only the sick. Why don’t you go and try to work out the meaning of these words, ‘I would have mercy, not sacrifice.’ I haven’t come to call the self-righteous. I have come to call sinners to repent.”

The Pharisees claimed to be spiritually complete, with no need of a spiritual physician. They considered tax collectors and Gentiles as dying from their soul diseases. So Jesus confronted these religious leaders with an obvious truth: Why would He not associate with the very people that needed His help?³⁹

A legal religion can never attract anyone to Jesus. It’s so devoid of love! Fasting and prayer motivated by a self-justifying spirit are abominable. Even solemn religious services, religious ceremonies, the public “humiliation” of self, and impressive sacrifices intended to show that a person is “entitled” to heaven are a complete deception. Nothing we can do can ever purchase salvation.⁴⁰

In the final analysis, it is only when we renounce our

self-interest that we can become a believer, a follower, a disciple of Jesus. The rich young ruler couldn't bring himself to do it. Matthew did. One made the right choice; the other didn't. Matthew was converted and entered a life of joy-filled service. The other continued a life of human prestige, wealth—and emptiness. One found eternal life; the other missed it. When we renounce self-interest, the Lord animates us with new life. Only “new bottles” can contain the “new wine” of a life renewed in Christ.⁴¹