

Sunday November 17, 2024

Lesson 5: Follow Me – The Rich and the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-30; Luke 18:18-30)

The fifth recorded instance in the Gospels where Jesus uttered the words “Follow Me” as a command can be found in Matthew Chapter 19, where a rich young man approached Jesus to check on his qualification status for eternal life. The focus of this message is on the perceived need-to-do items to earn eternal life.

Timeline – Tracking the Public Ministry of Jesus

Scripture informed us that the events of “Follow Me – Taking up the Cross” transitions Jesus’ public ministry to the masses towards his private ministry focusing on preparing the Twelve future apostles for the church age (Matt 16:18-20). The Gospel of John informed us that this period coincides with the final six months of Jesus’ ministry on earth, before He would be crucified (cf. Jn 7:1-4). The four gospel’s account on Jesus’ triumphant entry (Matt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19:28-44; Jn 12:12-19) sets the mark for Jesus’ final week before His crucifixion. Tracking Jesus’ ministry movement towards that final week would include the following:

- Jesus took Peter, James, and John to Mt Tabor, where the three witnessed His transfiguration (Matt 17:1-13; Mk 9:2-13; Lk 9:28-36)
- Coming down from the mountain, Jesus healed a demon possessed boy, a demon which His other disciples could not drive out (Matt 17:14-20; Mk 9:14-29; Lk 9:37-42).
 - Jesus predicted His death a second time (Matt 17:22-23; Mk 9:30-32; Lk 9:43-45)
- Jesus and His disciples arrived in Capernaum (Mk 9:33), where He shared various insights with them (note the common theme = ministry leadership attributes and mentality):
 - Paying the temple tax (Matt 17:24-27)
 - The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 18:1-5; Mk 9:33-36)
 - Whoever is not against us is with us (Mk 9:38-41)
 - Causing others to stumble (Matt 18:6-9; Mk 9:42-50)
 - Dealing with bad behaviors in the church (Matt 18:15-20)
 - Graceful approach with accountability (Matt 18:21-35)
- Jesus and His disciples began their final journey towards Judea (Matt 19:1). Along the way:
 - Jesus was tested by the Pharisees about ‘Divorce’ (Matt 19:1-11; Mk 10:1-12)
 - Jesus shared ‘Anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a little child’ (Matt 19:13-14; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17)
 - Jesus tested by “an expert in the law” about eternal life (Lk 10:25-29)
 - Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37)
 - Rich young ruler asked Jesus about eternal life (Matt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-30; Lk 18:18-30).
 - **Follow Me – The Rich and the Kingdom of God**
 - **Parable of the workers in the vineyard**
- Jesus spent the final few months of His time on earth in Judea, traveling between Jerusalem and various cities, including Bethany (Lk 10:38; Jn 11:1), Ephraim (Jn 11:54), Jericho (Matt 20:29; Lk 19:1) and other areas. Note: John Chapters 7-11 and Luke Chapters 10-19 covers this period in Judea.

The insights and discussions surrounding this fifth “Follow Me” instance happened either on this final journey towards Judea from Galilee (Matt 19; Mk 10), or between cities while in Judea (Lk 18). The context is directly related to the question about eternal life and what one ***needs to do*** in order to inherit it. All three Synoptic Gospels grouped this incident with Jesus’ message about receiving the Kingdom of God like a little child, suggesting that the message to the rich young ruler on this topic may be related.

Noting again that the final six months of Jesus’ ministry is primarily focused on preparing the Twelve future apostles, the lessons and insights should be viewed from this perspective; namely, what are the lessons that Jesus is trying to share with these future ministry leaders. With this understanding, the lessons can be broken down as follows:

- Humanity’s attitude towards religious practices (Matt 19:16-20)
- Humanity’s approach to eternal life (Matt 19:21-26)
- Humanity’s misunderstanding about Heavenly values (Matt 19:27-20:16)

Context – Humanity’s attitude towards religious practices (Matt 19:16-20; Mk 10:17-20; Lk 18:18-21)

Having just shared the message about receiving the Kingdom of God with childlike faith and humility, Jesus was approached by a man, who asked Jesus: “Teacher, what good thing shall I do so that I may obtain eternal life?” (Matt 19:16 NASB). All three Synoptic gospels cited that this man is wealthy (Matt 19:22; Mk 10:22, Lk 18:23). Matthew cited that the man is young (Matt 19:20; 22). Luke cited that this man is a ruler (Lk 18:18). Thus, the man must have been a prince of a wealthy family who held public office. Moreover, that he grew up obeying the commandments indicates that he is likely from a Jewish background.

In response to his question, Jesus began by clarifying what “good” means, that “there is only ONE who is good” (cf Matt 19:17a). What Jesus is doing is to define the standard. The young ruler was effectively asking Jesus to tell him what the standard is – “what good things” – to get into heaven. Jesus’ response to that line of thinking is that, the standard is GOD – true holiness, something that man can NEVER achieve (cf Rom 3:23). Jesus then added that if the young man wants to compare himself to the God-standard, start by comparing himself to the commandments (Matt 19:17b).

The young ruler evidently did not pick up Jesus’ point – or that he may be blinded by his own self-righteousness – as he follow-up his question by asking Jesus to identify the specific commandments that he must keep (Matt 19:18). The young man was clearly missing the point.

The attitude demonstrated by this young man highlights humanity’s problem towards salvation. Rather than to view the Old Testament Commandments – in whole – as a standard to see how humanity had fallen short of God’s holiness, mankind tends to view it as a task list of to-do items to achieve, which is impossible (cf Matt 19:21). This leads to the first principle that we can observe for the future apostles (ministry leaders) to recognize:

Principle: Humanity tends to view eternal salvation to be linked to some form of works-based religious practices.

Context – Humanity’s approach to eternal life (Matt 19:21-26; Mk 10:21-27; Lk 18:22-26)

The young ruler thought that he had met all the requirements of the Ten Commandments (Matt 19:20), measured by what he had achieved in life according to his “good” standards. Jesus recognized that the young man had missed the point completely and proceeded to reveal to him that he had, in fact, failed on the most important commandment: he did not love God because his wealth was his idol. Note that Jesus did not cite the first and second commandment earlier because He *likely* knew that the young man was blinded by his own reality of what “good” means. Jesus had to present it in practical terms so that the young man could see – that he harbored an idol in his life that has kept him from a personal relationship with God.

The young man proved Jesus correct when he chose to keep his idol – his wealth – rather than to follow Jesus. This prompted Jesus to share another insight with his future ministry leaders, that “...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 (Matt 19:24 NASB). On the surface, it may seem that Jesus is attacking wealth, that people would **always** choose wealth over God presumably because people with wealth may find that they don’t need God. Though there may be merits behind this thinking in a practical sense, this was not Jesus’ point. Observe the disciples’ response to this illustration: “...who then can be saved? (Matt 19:25)” The disciples were clearly not rich.

Many scholars have attempted to explain or humanize the “eye of the needle” illustration by equating this phrase with reference to a so-called “needle-gate” into a city, which is a smaller, narrower version of a normal size gate used by cities for low traffic, low security availability conditions. The problem with this explanation is that this so-called “needle-gate” practice did not exist at that time – or ever. No evidence was found to indicate such designs or practices were used in that era. Cities did not build two gates – a smaller (needle) and a larger one for this purpose / practice. Camels would just use the larger gate if one existed, rather than to try to go through a so-called “needle gate.” Moreover, even if such practices existed, the practice itself describes a *very difficult* situation, not an *impossible* situation. When Jesus responds to the disciples that “with man, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matt 19:26),” He was making a point about the impossibility – and not the difficulty – with His illustration.

The context for this illustration is that, in that culture at that time, one common belief promoted by some rabbis is that having wealth is evidence of God's approval; meaning that the possession of wealth was often equated with a person's standing before God (i.e.. you were wealthy because your efforts to gain that wealth was blessed by God. Therefore, you're more likely to have earned your place in heaven). This was probably a belief adopted by this rich young ruler. Jesus wanted to clarify this misunderstanding with the "eye of the needle" illustration. His point is not that having wealth is bad or that wealthy people find it harder to follow Jesus because – presumably – they don't believe they need Jesus. His point is that wealthy people believe in earning their wealth, earning what they have. Like everything else they have, they seek to earn eternal life. Eternal life cannot be bought, cannot be earned.

The imagery of a camel going through the eye of a literal needle is an imagery of impossibility. Man cannot earn their way to eternal life any more than man can push a camel through the eye of a needle. The disciples' question was based on the idea that, if not even the rich people's effort is enough to earn eternal life, who then can be saved? Jesus was illustrating the impossibility of man earning their way to salvation. This leads to the second principle that we can observe for the future apostles (ministry leaders) to recognize:

Principle: Humanity tends to adopt the belief that salvation must be earned.

Context – Humanity's misunderstanding about Heavenly Values (Matt 19:27-20:16; Mk 10:28-31)

The rationale for the previous principles is rooted in the difference between a worldly value system and the Heavenly value system. This instance of "Follow Me" began with the rich young ruler asking Jesus "what good thing shall I do..." with Jesus responding "Why are you asking Me about what is good? (Matt 19:16-17 NASB). Humanity's idea of "good" is different than God's idea of "good."

Responding to the needle illustration about the impossibility of earning salvation, Peter inquired, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us? (Matt 19:27 NASB)" What Peter is effectively asking is, what's the point of doing what we're doing if it's not to earn salvation?

The root of this question, again, is grounded in the difference between the worldly value system vs the Heavenly value system. Jesus responds by sharing a parable about workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), which is themed on "...many who are first will be last, and the last will be first (Matt 19:30 NASB)."

The parable of the workers in the vineyard – found in Matthew, but the principle also cited in Mark – describes a scenario focusing on the worldly expectation of a merit-based reward system: the more a person works, the more he/she should be rewarded. This is the worldly expectation based on a worldly value system. But this is not the Heavenly value system.

In the parable, the owner is God, the wage is salvation, and the point of the parable is that no matter how much or how little a person works to try to earn salvation, the amount of effort put into earning it is irrelevant. The same wage (salvation) is given to everyone that was invited into the vineyard. The ones who were in the vineyard first – the Pharisees / Jews – had a different expectation that they want to impose on others, labeling them as unqualified or undeserving unless they abide by the same effort (rules) they themselves had put in. This is why they grumble against Jesus, and why they were rebuked in the parable (Matt 20:15).

Referring back to the message about the children (Matt 19:13-15), children would have been thought of as the least qualified for the Kingdom of Heaven because they have yet to contribute to society to "earn" their place in heaven. This was the whole point of Jesus' message about the last being first, and why Jesus says "...anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it (Matt 19:17)." What the world values as least qualified – the children – is in fact, the most qualified. Those that believe strongly that salvation must first be earned will find themselves last in line because they will never be able to earn it.

God's value system – which is grace filled – is very different than man's value system, which tends to be merit based. This is not an attack against a merit-based value system for a functional society, or even a merit-based approach to heavenly rewards. In fact, Jesus' immediate response to Peter's question is grounded in a merit-based heavenly reward system (Matt 19:28-29). But as it relates to eternal life, it's all about God's grace. Merit plays no role in this equation.

This leads to the final principle for the future apostles (today's ministry leaders) to recognize:

Principle: Humanity's emphasis on merit-based value system can be an obstacle to their eternal life

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Luke 10:25-37: Parable of the Good Samaritan.

This parable was shared likely around the same time in the final six months of Jesus' public ministry on earth.

1. What is the key question, and how does the parable address this question?
2. Compare this parable with the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-30), what are the parallels? What are the differences? How does this parable contribute to your understanding of why the rich young ruler failed?
3. How does this parable contribute to your understanding of the "last shall be first" principle (Matt 20:1-16)?

Reflecting Upon Our World

Our world in recent years has been spiritually influenced by supernatural forces to promote an entitlement based value system (DEI – Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) that goes against humanity's natural inclination towards a merit based value system. D.E.I value system also impacts the ability to share truth in an absolute manner. Assume the position of a D.E.I worldly reality,

1. Today's lesson contrasts a merit-based value system against a Grace-based value system towards salvation. How would this contrast be different against a DEI value system? How can the parable of the workers in the vineyard be presented to an audience with a DEI mindset?
2. What are some ways for the truth of the gospel message be shared to people who embraced a DEI value system?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

The three principles in today's lesson highlight a common reality that humanity has embraced dating back to Old Testament times. Anyone who believes that heaven exists tend to embrace an 'earned' approach linked to some form of spiritual discipline in order to get to heaven.

1. Reflect your own personal spiritual journey. Did you ever believe that you have to "earn" salvation? When did you realize the fallacy of that belief? How did it come about?
2. Evaluate your personal understanding of heavenly rewards / heavenly value system (cf..Peter's question on 'what's the point'). What is your understanding between the two? Does your acts towards heavenly rewards impact your qualification for eternal life?
3. Reflect on your personal encounter with others in your spiritual journey. Did you ever view anyone as unqualified for eternal life? Do you still hold the view that people can be unqualified for eternal life? How do you define "qualify"?

These experiences that you may (or may not) have are not meant to be viewed upon negatively. In certain circumstances, they can be positive experiences. These are part of our spiritual walk that allows us to reflect and ponder over how we might handle things differently as we grow. Journal your reflection in a testimonial form so that you can be prepared to share your testimony as the Holy Spirit guides you in your walk.