

# WHY DO YOU CALL ME GOOD?

*SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED*

By Steve Zeisler

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We have been studying questions that Jesus asked as recorded in the book of Mark. The focus here is on the well-known passage about the rich young ruler. Let's look at Mark 10:17-22.

**As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"**

**"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"**

**"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."**

**Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."**

**At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.**

Matthew 19:20 tells us that the man was young, and Luke 18:18 tells us the man was from a ruling class. Yet with all his advantages, he wanted something he didn't have. He wanted God. Running to Jesus with enthusiasm, the man fell to his knees and asked, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" When Jesus said, "Keep the commandments," the young man answered, "I have kept all the commandments from my youth." He was not hypocritical in his claim to be blameless. Though he lacked understanding, he sincerely saw himself as someone who had cared about God all of his life.

What do we observe about Jesus in this interaction? First, Jesus responded to the man's question with tenderness and asked a question of his own in order to draw the man out, to focus him on his deepest need. Second, we learn in verse 21 that "Jesus looked at him and loved him." Many people who have wealth and other advantages are looked upon with envy rather than love. It is possible that this wealthy young man was never certain if others truly loved him for who he was or if they merely wanted something from him. Jesus wanted nothing from him; he simply looked at him and did so with obvious love.

Third, Jesus instructed the man. He listed several of the commandments, and the man answered, "I have kept them since my youth." This young man had wealth and elite social standing, and these advantages insulated him. His life had been easy and secure. He had everything; what could

possibly tempt him to murder, to theft, or to adultery? He would have little temptation to lie, defraud, or dishonor the parents who had provided for him so richly.

Why did God declare binding commandments? In Romans 7:7, Paul wrote, “Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’” The commandment made him aware of the sin in his life. The law is not intended to stir in us a sense of accomplishment; rather, it is the mirror of God’s righteousness, and it makes us see how far short we fall from God’s standard. The rich young ruler, however, saw the law as a testimony to religious success and further evidence that he was special. So Jesus told him to do something that would demand too much of him. The man needed to discover his own inadequacy in order to truly know God, so Jesus told him, “Sell everything, give to the poor, and follow me.”

Contrast this with the account in Mark 14 of the woman who anointed Jesus’ head with a very expensive jar of perfume. Some of those present rebuked her harshly, saying the money could have been used to feed the poor, but Jesus said she had done a better thing. The New Testament does not teach that all wealth should be given to the poor. However, the young ruler’s money had insulated him and prevented him from seeing his true self. Because he needed to get rid of his cocoon of security in order to discover his own inadequacy, his lack of trust in God, Jesus told him to give all of his money to the poor.

We have ways today of giving without getting personally involved. A person could sell everything, write a check to some charitable organization and assume the funds would provide for the poor. But in Jesus’ time, there was no banking system into which one could anonymously deposit money. The young man would have to leave his comfortable surroundings and take the money himself to those who were less fortunate than he was. The point was not that he should divest himself of his money but that he should interact with the poor, get to know them, and learn about a world he had avoided. Jesus said, “Walk with the poor. Follow me.” That is the instruction the young man received, and he realized the difficulty of what Jesus asked of him.

Like this young man, we are hungry to know God. We want to know what is true and good, and the only way to know that is to know the Lord. The journey to self-discovery involves being broken and reaching out as beggars desperate for help. We don’t know how the young man’s story ends. He walked away, perhaps experiencing desperation for the first time in his young life.

The account continues in verse 23.

**Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”**

**The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”**

**The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”**

**Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”**

The disciples were amazed at Jesus’ teaching. The conventional wisdom was that if a man had riches, it was because God favored him and had blessed him with wealth. Yet Jesus said that a camel could go through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man could enter God’s kingdom. Wealth can keep us from discovering critical truths. We can insulate ourselves from worldly cares if we just have enough “stuff.” It is easy to assume that the rich are better off, but the truth is that a life of struggle and anxiety makes us most willing to call out for help. Riches can make us settle for too little. C. S. Lewis writes,

*Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (1)*

Wealth can take away our desire for the very presence of God. We can have so much stuff that our hunger and thirst for righteousness wanes. Jesus’ disciples were amazed because he contradicted their thinking that it was an advantage to have it all.

This text does not teach that everyone should divest himself or herself of wealth. It does not say that it is easy for the poor to get into heaven. The poor cannot get into heaven any more easily than the rich can, but they are more likely to realize their need for God and their inability to please him on their own. He demands an unimaginably great price for access to his presence, a price that only Christ could pay. We cannot earn God’s favor; we can only receive it as a gift. With man it is impossible, but all things are possible with God.

Who will get into heaven? Who can please God? It is impossible. No one can do it. In her great hymn, “He Giveth More Grace,” Annie Johnson Flint wrote,

*His love has no limit;  
His grace has no measure;  
His pow’r has no boundary known unto men.  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again. (2)*

We cannot please God, but because it pleases him to give, he giveth and giveth and giveth again.

Now let’s look at the final part of our passage, beginning at verse 28:

**Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”**

**“I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”**

Peter was understandably confused. He had seen the young man walk away, and he had heard Jesus' words about riches and camels and needles. No one can be saved, but with God all things are possible. Peter said, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you." He was clearly wondering, "What about us?" The Lord replied, "You haven't given up anything that you won't get back a hundred fold."

Everyone of us has more family in Christ than we have apart from him. You can go anywhere in the world, and people you didn't even know become friends welcoming you into their homes and churches in Christ's name. It is an extraordinary thing. To those who follow him, Jesus promises blessing and persecution in this age, and eternal life in the age to come.

In verse 31, Jesus reminded Peter that questions of who got the most or the least are not worthy of our attention. The last will be the first and the first last. Riches are no advantage because of their capacity to dull our senses, and none of us has any chance of getting to heaven except by God's grace. Rather than concerning ourselves with external things, we are to be grateful for his good gifts and enter into his service with joy and thanksgiving, looking for opportunities to express what is true.

I want to close with three summary observations. First, Jesus told the young man, "Sell all you have." The point is to break free from your cocoon of insulation, to see yourself as you are and acknowledge your need for God. Second, he said, "Give to the poor." Walk alongside someone who is needy and hurting, someone who can benefit from the advantages you have enjoyed. Third, he said, "Follow me." Go where I go. Serve others at my command, for my sake.

We should be grateful for the advantages we have. We are a people of numerous advantages, but many of us have had our senses dulled by what we have. Let us ask the Lord to show us what is true and to move us closer to him. Let us be people who don't walk sorrowfully away but who instead choose to follow him more closely.

#### NOTES

- (1) Lewis, C. S. "The Weight of Glory." In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York, Touchstone, collection copyright 1975, 1980 by The Trustees of The Estate of C. S. Lewis.
- (2) Annie Johnson Flint. "He Giveth More Grace," copyright 1941. Renewed 1969 by Lillenas Publishing Co.

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