ROADBLOCKS TO SALVATION

Matthew 19:16-30

Today we’re looking at the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler. Our text is in Matthew 19. Mark and Luke (Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30) give parallel accounts of the same story, so they will add a few details to what Matthew tells us. Luke is the only one of the 3 who says the man was a **ruler**. He doesn’t say what kind of a ruler he was. Most commentaries say that, more than likely, he was a ruler in a local synagogue, a religious leader. Matthew is the only one of the 3 who says he was **young**. All 3 say he was **rich** – he had many possessions. He’s not named in any of the accounts, so we just call him the “Rich Young Ruler.” *[Show map, briefly mention where the story takes place (Perea – “Judea beyond the Jordan”)]*

The story of the rich young ruler is a sad story! We studied a similar story in John 3 about another ruler, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee, who came to visit Jesus in secret, by night. Mark tells us that this man came during the daytime and he didn’t just walk up to Jesus, he “ran up” and then he “knelt.” There is a crowd of people with Jesus, including His 12 disciples, so this is not some secret encounter but a very public one. This meeting with Jesus is also different from that of Nicodemus in the end result. John’s gospel tells us that eventually Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus. No doubt what Jesus told him in John 3 changed his life. But that does not appear to be the case in our story here in Matthew 19. The rich young ruler, no doubt a religious man, very devout and respected, eagerly approaches Jesus. He asks how to be saved. He openly admits that he doesn’t have eternal life, but he feels a need for it. He wants it badly. He’s spiritually unfulfilled. So he asks the right question. And he goes to the right person. All the elements are there for successful evangelism. But in the end he goes away sad (Mark says “disheartened”). No evidence that we see in scripture that he ever got saved. So it’s a sad story. But we can learn from it.

READ Matthew 19:16

This “man” is the rich young ruler. He asks how he can have eternal life, how he can obtain salvation. And you can see his Jewish mindset. He believes that he needs to DO something, some “good deed,” in order to get it. His religion is centered on keeping the Law – if you work at it, if you keep God’s Law, then you’ll make it to heaven. But Jesus knows this man’s heart. He knows the man is really self-sufficient and self-righteous. So Jesus needs to get this man to see himself the way God sees him. Look at how Jesus responds to his question…

READ Matthew 19:17-19

V 17 Jesus reminds this man that only God is good. No man is good. Psalm 14:1-3 says: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” So nobody but God is good. This man obviously doesn’t see Jesus as God, but rather as merely as a man. We know that because he calls Jesus, “Teacher.” Mark and Luke tell us that the man addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher.” He doesn’t view Jesus as the divine Son of God and this becomes clear later.

Jesus lets him know God’s high standard of righteousness – you must keep the Law perfectly. “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” Sounds simple – just obey the Law of God. So the man asks Jesus, which commandments he should keep? Again, Jesus knows this man’s heart. He knows that he struggles in the area of loving other people. So Jesus focuses on that and He names off the 5th thru 9th Commandments – those dealing with our relationship to others. Then, instead of quoting the 10th Commandment – the one about not coveting your neighbor’s house or wife or servants, etc – Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now before we go any further let me ask you, can anyone keep God’s Law perfectly? Well we just read the verse in Psalms that says, “There is none who does good,” so the answer is a resounding, NO! Keeping the Law perfectly is impossible. In fact the whole purpose of the Law was to show us that we are sinners, that we fall short of God’s perfect holy standard and that we need God’s mercy and grace – “Through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). But the Jews of Jesus’ day, like this man, worked at keeping the law, they practice a works-based religion believing that if they kept it then God would be pleased with them and let us into heaven. No! The whole Gospel message is that we can’t do anything to merit God’s favor. We can’t do enough good works to tip the scales in our favor. We’re doomed. All our righteousness – the best we can do – is “as filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). The bottom line: we can’t save ourselves!

So if a person is going to come to Jesus and receive eternal life it’s imperative that they recognize and deal with their sin problem. An essential element in evangelism is getting the person you’re witnessing to, to admit they are a sinner who has offended a holy God and in need of a Savior. This man knew deep down that something was missing in his spiritual life and Jesus is trying to get him to recognize what it is.

Well, let’s see how the man responds…

READ Matthew 19:20

“I’m doing pretty good, Jesus! I’ve kept all those commandments that you just mentioned.” There’s no admission at all that he’s a sinner. In fact it sounds like he is making a case that he is not a sinner at all. If this guy is indeed a ruler in the local synagogue, then as he stands out in front of all these people he has a certain image to uphold. And that was part of the problem with the Pharisees. They were self-righteous and believed they were doing good enough to get into heaven. And then along comes Jesus and He exposes them for the sinners they are and they don’t like it.

So here we see a man who appears eager and ready to receive eternal life, a man who senses a deep spiritual need in his heart, but he encounters a roadblock to salvation. And what’s that? A failure to recognize his own sin. Jesus is trying to get him to see that, but he just can’t see it.

I love what Mark’s gospel says at this point – “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said…”

READ Matthew 19:21

That sounds like what Jesus has been telling His disciples. A couple of weeks ago we studied Matthew 16. In v 24-25, Jesus told his disciples that “if anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” And then Jesus talked about laying up treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth. In Luke 14:33 Jesus said, “Any one of you who does not renounce all (KJV “forsaketh all”) that he has cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus basically tells the rich young ruler, “OK, you say you’re perfect, you say you really love your neighbor as yourself, then go and give everything you own to him! If that’s what it takes to follow me, will you be willing to do it? Will you obey Me no matter the cost to you personally?”

If we are going to truly follow Jesus then we must be willing to die to ourselves, to give up our own rights, dreams and ambitions, to potentially leave friends and family behind and follow Jesus… no matter what. If He is going to be our Savior, He must be our Lord. And we must follow Him. Well, look at the man’s response to Jesus’ demand…

READ Matthew 19:22

The man was saddened by what he heard. Why would he be sad? Because the price that Jesus was asking him to pay for eternal life, for his salvation, something which he wanted badly, was too high. Frankly, when it came right down to it, his possessions were more important to him than following Jesus.

So here we can see another roadblock to salvation and that is not submitting to the lordship of Jesus Christ Lord of our life. And so we read here that this rich young ruler goes away… unbroken, unchanged, and unsaved. Sad! He came to Jesus seeking eternal life. He wanted the benefits. But when Jesus told him what it would cost, bottom line, he was unwilling to pay it.

By the way, just as a side note if you want to see the exact opposite attitude as the rich young ruler’s look at the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19:1-10. When Jesus confronted Zacchaeus who was also rich and seeking Jesus. But when he encounters Jesus, Zacchaeus recognizes he has sinned and voluntarily offers up a large portion of his wealth in order to make things right with others. Jesus completely changed his priorities and his heart. And so Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house…”

Well, Jesus uses his encounter with the rich young ruler as a teaching moment for His disciples.

READ Matthew 19:23-26

Apart from God, salvation, eternal life, the kingdom of heaven, being born again – all are impossible. There’s no softening of this doctrine *(what some have interpreted the camel thru the eye of a needle to mean)* – it’s not just hard to be saved based on human effort alone, on our own terms. It’s impossible! “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” You must come to God on His terms – and it’s not by your own effort or merit, but it is by grace through faith in Christ alone – fully trusting that Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins. He wants to be the Lord and Master of your life.

Many in the world might consider that to be too high a price to pay but as Jesus said, “What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world and lose, forfeit his own soul?

Why is Jesus picking on rich people here in this text? Well, by and large, rich people (that is all of us in this room by the way) tend to have a false sense of security in their possessions (see parable of the rich fool, Luke 12); rich people have much invested in this world and where your treasure is, Jesus taught, there will your heart be also. By the way, just for the record, Jesus says it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (implication by his or her own efforts) – it’s impossible for poor people and the middle class as well!

But it doesn’t end there – Jesus adds that last phrase in v 26, “with God all things are possible.” Only God can change a heart. How do we become children of God. John says, “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13).

Epilogue (reference Matthew 19:37-30): Peter reminds Jesus that the disciples had done exactly what Jesus had asked the rich young ruler to do – “Hey, we came on your terms. We have forsaken everything and followed You. What will we have?” Jesus tells Peter that they will receive a greater reward in the millennial kingdom. Your reward will be great, but it won’t come in this life. God may choose to bless you in this life, but the real reward awaits those who have left all and followed Him.

Applications – (1) Evangelism must include bringing people to acknowledge their sin and leading people to follow the lordship of Jesus in their lives. (2) Don’t let anything, even good things, things that God has blessed you with, come between you and following Him. So many things out there to distract us from our commitment to Christ.

Hymn of commitment to Jesus in all areas of your life – “Take My Life and Let It Be…”