
Morals, Deeds, & Salvation

SCOTT HOEZEE

On his way to Jerusalem and to the cross, Jesus met a lot of people. He met the confused and the distressed, the angry and the innocent. Now and then, he also ran across very earnest people, and none more so than the person we often refer to as the rich, young ruler. All three of the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke include this encounter, so we know the evangelists, at least, regarded this as a very important story that has something to do with the core of the Gospel, but what is that core thing? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are in this series, Dave, following Jesus from Luke 9 through Luke 19 as he travels to Jerusalem, and I think there is probably no better way to begin this episode than just reading this story from Luke 18:18-30, and it begins like this:

¹⁸A certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good except God alone. ²⁰But, you know the commandments: You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother.” ²¹“All these I have kept since I was boy,” he said. ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, and then come and follow me.” ²³When he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. ²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. ²⁵Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

DAVE BAST

²⁶Those who heard, asked, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus replied, “What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.” ²⁸Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you.” ²⁹“Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “No one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come, eternal life.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Lots to think about here. Lots and lots of theological and Biblical layers here, but let’s just start by thinking about the question that begins the whole thing. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a version of a question we still hear people say today, “What must I do to be saved?” Or, “How can I get to heaven when I die?” It is an ultimate question; it is an important question; maybe it is *the* most important question, but the way the young man frames it, is it the right question?

DAVE BAST

Well, he is an attractive figure, certainly. And actually, this story – I think you pointed this out in the top of the program – appears in all of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not too many stories do, actually.

DAVE BAST

No, and we are told here he is a ruler; he is upper class; he is high society; he is from a powerful family, no doubt; he has a position of importance and authority; he is very wealthy. One of the other Gospels also says he is young, and that is how we get his common name, the rich, young ruler. So, this guy has got it going for him; I mean, he has a Harvard MBA and he has a beautiful home and he has an important job; maybe he is working in Washington in the Administration; and yet, he is earnest. He has this very serious religious question, and so who better to go to than to Jesus?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And probably all of the things he got in life were things that he earned and did and accomplished. He is Mr. Accomplishment, here; and so, his question: What must I do? It is the same type of question – the premise of the question – the foundation of the question – is like a student going to her teacher and saying, “Mrs. Wilson, what do I have to do to get a good grade in Algebra class?” Or, an employee goes up to his manager and says, “Bill, what do I have to do to get promoted in this company?” What is behind that question is, there are things you can do. You study hard. You do well. You go over the top when you get assignments at work. You can do it.

DAVE BAST

Right; those are great examples, Scott, because I can just see this guy – you know he was one of those kids who were going up to the teacher in class...

SCOTT HOEZEE

“Can I do extra credit?”

DAVE BAST

This is exactly that guy. He has been successful. He has managed it, but there is just one more thing – “So, Jesus, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?” You kind of wonder whether he really thought there was something more that he had to do or whether he was just looking for Jesus’ endorsement, like saying: Boom! Oh, man! You’ve made it! It is almost as though he was expected Jesus to fawn on him and flatter him and say, “Wow, you are the greatest,” the way everyone else, no doubt, has been doing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, probably. The rich and the successful, as many Hollywood actors and very wealthy entrepreneurs could tell you, they get a whole lot of flattery in their lives because everybody would like to be on the rich guy’s good side. So, he is probably used to that. But again, the premise is that you can get your way to heaven. Now, before this program is finished, and of course, as many of our listeners will know anyway from the Gospel, that is really not the right way to think about salvation if we are going to ultimately get there by grace alone; but, that seems to be the wrong way to do it. But then, the question becomes: If that is the wrong way to think about how you are going to get to heaven – how you are going to be saved – why does Jesus respond by giving him a list? It is almost as though, at first glance, Jesus is endorsing this guy’s method of working his own way to heaven. Well, okay; what must you do? Here are a few things. Why would Jesus do that?

DAVE BAST

Well, there are a couple of things about Jesus’ response to this guy that are arresting. The very first thing is his question back, “Why do you call me good? There is no one good except God.” We know that Jesus is not rejecting the title *good* for himself. We put this in the context of the whole picture of Jesus from the Gospels, and Jesus made incredible claims for himself, including the claim to be God on more than one occasion – I and the Father are one – so, what he seems to be doing is immediately startling the guy, because this guy just

strolls up – and again, he is a brown-noser – “Good Teacher, what must I do?” So, Jesus brings him up short, just like that, and says: Hey, wait a minute; time out here. And then he lays on him the list of the commandments, and the guy says, “Well...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Done!

DAVE BAST

Check. Ten Commandments, yeah; been there, done that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What else you got? Come on, stamp my passport. I am going to heaven, just stamp it, Jesus; validate my ticket right now.

Then the question becomes: Why does Jesus do this? Well, I think he is playing into this guy’s hand a little bit. Jesus is leading him down a path where ultimately Jesus is going to pull the rug out from underneath him – in a loving way, though, right? It is a teachable moment for this young man. So, since the guy is completely hung up on what he has to do to earn God’s favor, Jesus says: Fine, you want to talk about doing things?

There is one more; sell everything you have and give it to the poor and then – you are not done yet – you still have to come follow me, but go do that, and that is the last red check on the check list; put that red check in the check box and that is good; and that, of course, is what breaks the guy’s heart. He is just not able or willing to do it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is as though Jesus is saying: You really think you have kept those commandments? You do not have any idea what it means to keep the commandments. It is not just about avoiding this, that, or the other thing. It is about doing things positively and lovingly for your neighbor; so, here is what you add to all of that; get rid of everything.

Well, we want to see what comes next in this man’s response to Jesus’ demand, and we will look at that in a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are looking at Luke Chapter 18; this well-known encounter of Jesus and this rich young man, and we have seen that the young man is hung up on doing. He thinks he can earn his own way to heaven, and claims, somewhat grandly, that he has kept all of the commandments of God. So, Jesus gives him another command, which actually is not technically a command. You are not going to find this in the law of God in the Old Testament. Nowhere are we told we must all sell everything we have; in fact, a lot of the law in the Old Testament is protecting property rights; but Jesus wants to get at this man. He wants to go for the chink in his moral armor as a way to teach him, ultimately, something important. So, Jesus tells him something that Jesus senses he will not be able to do, either because of weakness or unwillingness. He did it out of love. I like Mark’s version of this story, that after the young man says, “All of those I have kept.” I’ve got the whole law down pat, Jesus; what else do I have to do? Mark says Jesus loved him. He loved him; and I think he did, but Jesus loved him too much to let him keep having this wrong idea of how we get into the kingdom of God, and so he tells him something that he just cannot do, and then Jesus says...

DAVE BAST

It is as though he is going to expose the guy's false pretensions of being so good, so morally upright, and such a keeper of the law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unfortunately – and there is an implication in this passage for people with a lot of money – but, we do tend to make it only about money, when I think there is a larger point. So, Jesus does go on to say, “It is hard for the rich to be saved. You could better thread a camel through the eye of a needle,” (like a sewing thread), “than have a rich man enter the kingdom of God.” So, we think this is only about the rich, but it is really about anybody who thinks – maybe the rich are more self-reliant and think they can do it on their own than some of the rest of us, I do not know; but I think we all tend to get hung up on our own deeds – but the point is, anybody who thinks salvation is about my accomplishments and God rewarding me is going to go away from Jesus sad. We cannot get the camel through the eye of the needle, and that is why the disciples say, “Well, than who can be saved?” If a good guy like this cannot do it, then who can get saved? And Jesus says: You know who can get saved on their own? Nobody.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nobody. It is impossible.

DAVE BAST

Right. This man is not only rich in financial terms, he is rich in morality. He is no doubt rich in religion.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he is a good person.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he genuinely is, but none of that is good enough. None of that can make it happen for you; and really, the point of the story is just this flabbergasted reaction of the disciples, “Who can be saved?” Because again the presumption was someone who is rich in all of these ways must be especially blessed by God. Wealth is a sign, a token, of divine favor. Morality and religion; these are all wonderful things that raise us high in God's estimation; at least, so it seems to us. And Jesus is really joking with this camel and needle eye thing. In fact, there is some reason to believe that it was not so much a sewing needle as it was a small gate that would be set in the larger gate of a city, and Jesus is conjuring up the image of trying to squeeze this big, tall, ugly animal with its hump – squeeze it through this little gate, which was known as the eye of the needle. So, it is almost a comic...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not going to happen.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is not going to happen, and the flat answer is, it is impossible, but praise God, with him even the salvation of the impossible is possible.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is all about humility, which – the humility to admit that; being humble enough to say, “I cannot do it. I have to give myself up to God.” Humility is the key to this text, which the disciples would have known had they been paying attention, because here are verses 15 through 17 that come just before, and this comes just before this story, and all three of the Gospels include it, this is the frame. Let me just read Luke 18:15-17: ¹⁵People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. ¹⁶But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and

do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom like a little child will never enter it.”

And you flow directly from that verse to: A certain ruler asked him... So, it is as though Jesus is patting the heads of the little children – he is down on his knees patting the kids’ heads, saying: This example of humility; that is who you have to be like to get into the kingdom. Jesus gets up off his knees and here is this guy in his face. The guy, who was not a kid; he is a self-made man; he is this rugged individual. So, here is the anti-child, the young man, and so the point is: No, no, no, no. It is the little kid down there that the rich young man would not deign to even look at – that is the key – humility.

DAVE BAST

Well, you’re pointing out one of the most important things for any of us when we read the Bible, and that is look at what is around the story that we are reading, or around the verse. We are talking about the importance of context, and I think you are absolutely right in drawing this contrast, because we often read the story of Jesus and the little children and we just go: Aw, isn’t that nice? Let’s have a baptism or a dedication. Well, what does it mean to receive the kingdom like a child? Well, you must have childlike faith and you must have... No, no, no. That is not the point at all. The point is the only way to receive the kingdom is as an absolute, helpless beggar to be given to it; because his use of the child as an example is to raise up one who had no status, no power, no ability; who only had what is given to them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, in Jesus’ day, a child would have been a negative example.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They were second class; not quite human; losers. They do not produce.

DAVE BAST

We have come to romanticize childhood and children, but that was absolutely not the way it was in that culture. A child was an example of a helpless, useless, drag. That is the flipside of what this rich young ruler is trying to be and do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The opposite of him; the foil, as they would say in literature. It is the opposite of the man.

So, that comes first. Jesus says you have got to be a loser. You have to know that you can only receive; you have nothing to give – that is what a child is. You can only receive the kingdom. That is what you have to be like. So, here comes this rich young man who thinks he can do it on his own, and Jesus is saying: No, you cannot.

By the way, speaking of context, Dave; if we went just beyond this story and picked up on Luke 18:31, Jesus predicts his death for the third time immediately. In other words: my death is going to save the world; not your moral deeds. And then I like Luke 18:34; the disciples did not understand any of this. They are still hung up on prestige, just like the rich, young man. So, in this story they are saying, who can be saved? And Jesus says: Humanly speaking, nobody. But you know what? God is clever. He is really good at getting camels through the eye of a needle. He does it every day. It is called salvation by grace alone.

That is what I always think is interesting. I think Jesus was hoping that the day would come when this young man would come back heartbroken and saying: I have tried to do it on my own, but I cannot. Is there another way? And Jesus would say: Child, yes there is.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you would hope that it the way it would turn out; maybe it did. But there is one more thing here, just at the end, where Peter says to Jesus, he points out: Well, hey, look. We have done that. Here we are; what is in it for us? Jesus has something surprising to say to him as well. We will look at that next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. The passage we are digging into, as we always do on this program, is Luke 18, and Jesus' encounter with a rich man, who we just saw, Jesus purposely broke his heart by disabusing him of the idea that you can work your own way to heaven. The lesson for the disciples is: Look, that is not what it is about. I just told you, you have to be like a little child. You have to be humble. You have to accept that the kingdom is not earned, it is received. And then, right after this story, as we just said in the last segment, Dave, Jesus says the way you are going to receive it is going to be through my death on the cross. Only I can do that. In humility you have to receive it. And yet, Peter goes on to say: But we have done a lot of things; what about that? Jesus says something very interesting in reply.

DAVE BAST

Well, he says that no one who has left home or wife or brother or sister, parents, children – family, in other words – for my sake, for the sake of the kingdom of God, will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come – oh, by the way, eternal life – which is to say, it is no real sacrifice. Even if the rich, young man had sold all that he had and given it to the poor, he would have gotten so much more in return. But, Jesus is not saying here, do this shrewdly – you know, as an investment – actually, you can double your money if you just give it away and God will give you twice as much – I do not think he is saying that in that kind of literalistic way, do you, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

No. Notice what Jesus does not say. When Peter says: We have given up everything. Jesus does not say to him: You know, Peter, you and the rest of the disciples – you gentlemen are the exception. You have earned your own way into the kingdom. Good job! No, no, Jesus just says: you are in the kingdom by grace already. I came to you and said follow me. I started this thing. But, when you give up things, yes, the kingdom of God is going to be a wonderful place where you are going to have all kinds of wonderful things, but even that is the overflow of grace. It is not something you earned; it is gravy; it is God's goodness to you.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; salvation is by grace; the rewards are by grace, too. We have not earned any of that. But, it is as if to say, God is so overwhelmingly generous that no sacrifice you could imaginably make in order to follow Jesus would fail to be repaid tenfold or a hundredfold. You just get so much more.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Jesus is saying by extension, too, Dave, I think – you know, on our last program we talked about gratitude. We were in Luke 17, the previous chapter, and talking about the ten men who were healed and only one said thanks – we pointed out on that program that all that we do for Jesus and for God in this life is all a big thank-you note – the things we sacrifice; the things we refuse to do; the mercy we do; the service we do – we are not earning our way to heaven because God grades on the curve. We are already in heaven by grace; we are saying: Thanks. Every day: Thank you. Everything I do, thank you. I am not trying to work my way to heaven or climb the ladder on my own to heaven. I am in heaven by grace already. I have received it like a little child, as we saw in the preface to this story, and now I am just saying thanks. So, it is important, but it is important to keep things straight in terms of the order of things. Our good deeds come second, not first.

DAVE BAST

On this business of saying thank you and generosity, I ran across a little blog item the other day that said a study has shown that money can make you happy – then the tagline – if you give it away. Boy, that is the truth. Good works can be rewarded if you do not think about them when you do them. If you are just expressing your gratitude to God for what he has done for you; if you are just trying to follow Jesus and imitate Jesus, you will receive beyond belief from the hand of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe the last thing to look at, Dave, just practically, because Jesus does give him something to do: Sell all you have and give it to the poor. Sometimes I think we in the Church inadvertently still read this story over all as an indication that, yes, if you work hard enough, you will be rewarded and God will take you to heaven. So, sometimes I have done a little thought experiment. Suppose that by some herculean effort of will, this young man did it. He did sell everything he had and he gave everything to the poor; suppose he did it. And then suppose he came back to Jesus and said: Ta-da! I did it! I even did that. Now can you bring me to heaven? Notice what Jesus says last to him: Even if you do all of that; then come follow me. So, had he come back to Jesus, it was not done yet. Jesus still would have said: Follow me. Even if he had sold everything, did that really seal the deal? No. Follow me.

Dave, why are we doing this series during Lent? To where are we following Jesus in this series? We are going to the cross.

DAVE BAST

Right. Exactly, yes. If he had done all that – and surely Jesus' challenge to him to get rid of everything was so that, in throwing all of the junk out of his life, he would be sure to be getting rid of the one thing that was maybe preventing him from coming to Jesus and following him – if he had followed him, he would have ended up at Calvary – at Golgotha – and he would have been kneeling at the foot of the cross.

What is that old Gospel hymn – *The Old Rugged Cross*: All my glories and shames I lay down – surrendering them all to the Lord Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A friend of mine named Heidi DeYoung was at a conference, and she said, too: If this young man had – even if he had sold everything – if he followed Jesus, he would have ended up with everybody else at the foot of the cross; and what would have happened to that young man, even if, by some mistake of Theology, he was still thinking it was about his accomplishments, what would happen when he looked up at that cross – looked up at Jesus – he would have said: Oh, my; compared to the supreme sacrifice of God's only Son, why would I ever have thought that anything little old I could have done would have mattered at all? It is all Jesus. It is all his sacrifice. I am done, but I want to receive – like a little child – what only Jesus could give. That is where Jesus wanted this young man to end up. But, you know what? That is where he wants all of us to end up.

DAVE BAST

Yes. That is the Gospel – the Gospel invitation; give up all you have and come and follow me and receive life and so much more.

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com, our website, to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/morals-deeds-salvation>

Printed on April 1, 2025