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HOW GOOD PEOPLE GET SAVED

Luke 18:18-27

By

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November 21, 1999

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Luke Lesson 84

How Good People Get Saved Luke 18:18-27

If Jesus had taken an evangelism training course, He would have dealt differently with the rich young ruler. From an evangelist's point of view, this guy was a piece of cake. His eagerness is evident from the fact that (Mark 10:17 reports) he ran, not walked, up to Jesus. He even knelt down before Jesus, right in front of others, and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus didn't even have to figure out how to turn the conversation to spiritual things! What an opportunity! Shouldn't be too hard to get a decision!

And the man was a choice prospect. Matthew tells us that he was *young*. He still had most of his adult life ahead of him. He was a *ruler* (Luke 18:18). The term is not specific, but it points to someone in a position of authority, either in the religious or civil community. He was in a place of influence in spite of his youthfulness. And, he was *extremely rich* (Luke 18:23). With just a tithe, he could have bankrolled Jesus' mission for years to come. What a key person! But Jesus let him walk away unconverted.

Not only that, but the man was from a good background. He didn't have any serious problems to overcome—no drugs or alcohol, no history of trouble with the law. From his youth, he had tried to keep the Ten Commandments, and he had done a pretty good job of it. He was a fine young man, the kind that any church would lift up as an example. It shouldn't take much to lead this man to Christ. But Jesus seemed to take the wrong approach!

Anyone with a little bit of training knows that when a person asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the right answer is, "You don't have to do anything. Eternal life is completely free! Just believe in Jesus and receive God's free gift!" Then you lead him in prayer to receive Christ, give him assurance of salvation, and rejoice that another name has been added to the Book of Life!

The one thing you would never do with such an evangelistic prospect is to tell him to keep the Ten Commandments as the way

to gain eternal life. We all know that obeying the commandments won't get anyone into heaven. And yet that is precisely what Jesus did! When the guy replies that he has done that, Jesus then brings up the subject of money and tells him to give away everything—not a tenth, but the whole works—and then he will have eternal life. We won't even bring up the subject of money in the first ten follow-up appointments, but here Jesus brings it up with an evangelistic contact and tells him that if he gave it all away, he would go to heaven! Jesus really could have used some training in how to share His faith!

There's another possibility, of course. If it seems to us that Jesus blew a choice opportunity and that He did not share the gospel clearly with this eager young man (if it had been anyone other than Jesus who had taken this approach, we all would say that he blew it), then perhaps Jesus has something to teach us about the gospel message and how to share it. In particular, He teaches us how to share the gospel with good people—those who believe in God and have lived decent lives. There are three main lessons:

1. Even good people need salvation.

This man believed in God and was zealous for spiritual things. He was a sincere, moral young man who was trying his best to please God. But he was lacking eternal life. He was good, but he was lost.

I encounter people like this all the time—decent, moral people. Often they have been raised in the church. Their parents have taught them right from wrong. They hold responsible jobs, pay their taxes, obey the law, are faithful to their marriages, attend church, and even give to the church. They give their time to service clubs and to wholesome youth activities, like Scouts and coaching sports teams. They're good people, the kind that you would want for neighbors.

But even though they are good, they do not have eternal life. They lack treasure in heaven (18:22). They have not entered the kingdom of God (18:24, 25). They are not saved (18:26). All of these terms in the text point to the same thing, namely, being rightly related to God in the present so as to spend eternity with Him in heaven after death. As this story makes evident, it is not

enough to be a very good person. Even good people need salvation because they are not good enough. It raises the important question, "What must a good person do to be saved?"

When I say "good person," I am referring not only to those whom others would label as good, but also to those who view themselves as good. Most people flatter themselves by thinking that they are on the upward side of the goodness curve. Satan has blinded us to the enormity of our sin in God's sight. And, we all compare ourselves with those who are worse sinners than we are, not with those who are better. I read about a portly fellow who put his beer, wine, cigars, and an "adult" magazine on the counter. As the checker rang up the total, the man suddenly dropped a candy bar in front of her. "I almost forgot," he said guiltily. "My one vice." (*Reader's Digest* [7/88], p. 36).

So if you are inclined to think of yourself as a basically good person, this message is for you. The first thing it shows you is that you need the salvation that the Bible talks about because you are not good enough for heaven. No one is. God's Word states, "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). Even the best people need salvation. So, how are good people saved?

2. Good people are saved by abandoning trust in their own goodness, because salvation by human goodness is impossible.

Jesus shocked the disciples (Mark 10:24, 26) by saying as this young man walked away (Luke 18:24), "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples and most Jews thought that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. But Jesus says that it is a definite spiritual hindrance or danger. He continues, "For 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." Contrary to popular belief, He was not referring to a low gate in the wall of Jerusalem where a camel had to get down on its knees to enter. He was referring to a camel going through the eye of a needle. In other words, He is saying that salvation for a rich man is not just difficult; it's impossible. The stunned disciples ask, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus confirms what they're thinking: "It is impossible with men." No one can be good enough to be saved.

The story brings out three reasons why salvation by human goodness is impossible:

- A. Salvation by human goodness is impossible because human goodness can never compare with God's goodness.

The young man addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher." This was an unusual way to address a Jewish teacher and it bordered on flattery. Jesus challenged him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone" (18:19). Cultists and critics jump on this statement to say that Jesus was denying His own deity. But they miss the point. If Jesus were not God in human flesh, to tell this man to sell everything and follow Him would be on the par of a Jim Jones type of cult leader! But Jesus' point was not to make a statement about Himself, but rather to challenge the young man's superficial use of the word "good." He was using "good" like we use the word "love." We say, "I love pizza" or "I love my dog" in the same breath as "I love my wife," and then "I love Jesus." In so doing, we cheapen the meaning of the word, especially when applied to Jesus. That's why Jesus took him to task.

The man would have agreed that God is good, in fact, better than any human being. He also called Jesus good, and he probably would have said that Jesus was an exceptionally good man. But if you had asked, he also would have called himself a good man. He kept the commandments. He wasn't a sinner, like the publicans and prostitutes. He was a good man seeking to learn from another good man what else he could do to inherit eternal life.

Many commentators say that Jesus was telling the young man that he ought not call Jesus good unless he was prepared to affirm that He is God. But that is probably too subtle a refinement. Rather, Jesus was pointing out the fact that God and His absolute goodness were much higher than he realized. As B. B. Warfield sums it up, "Jesus' concern here is not to glorify Himself, but God: it is not to give any instruction concerning His own person whatever, but to indicate the published will of God as the sole and the perfect prescription for the pleasing of God" (*The Person and Work of Christ* [Presbyterian and Reformed], p. 185).

Thus the man needed to see that God in His awesome holiness and absolute perfection is the minimum level of goodness

necessary to inherit eternal life. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Or, as Isaiah pointed out (64:6, NIV), "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" in God's sight. The young man's flippant use of the word "good" showed that he did not grasp the absolute goodness of God that is necessary to be in His presence in heaven for all eternity. Salvation by human goodness is impossible because it can never compare to God's goodness.

- B. Salvation by human goodness is impossible because human goodness always falls short of God's holy law.

The difference between this point and the previous one is that there the focus was on God's *nature* as holy, whereas here the focus is on God's *Law* as the expression of His holiness toward the human race. The young man asks what he can *do* to gain eternal life and so Jesus responds, "Keep the Ten Commandments." Jesus mentions the second table, which contains commandments that focus on our duty to our fellow man, because these commands are somewhat outward and observable. If a person could keep all of God's commandments for all of his life, not only outwardly but on the thought level (as Jesus explains in the Sermon on the Mount), then he would merit eternal life (Lev. 18:5).

The man claims to have done all these things from his youth up. Jesus easily could have challenged him on this answer. As J. C. Ryle exclaims, "An answer more full of darkness and self-ignorance it is impossible to conceive! He who made it could have known nothing rightly, either about himself, or God, or God's law" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:271). But Jesus let his answer go by and pressed on to the man's chief problem: "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (18:22).

Why did Jesus lay this requirement on this man? If it were a universal requirement for salvation, Jesus would have put the same demand on Zaccheus, but He did not (19:1-10). There are several views, but I believe that Jesus was using the Law as a tutor to convict the man of his sin (Gal. 3:24). The man claimed to keep all of the commandments, but Jesus is saying, in effect, "You don't keep the first half of the commandments, to love God with all your

heart, because your money is your god. You're an idolater. And, you don't keep the second half, to love your neighbor as yourself, because you are unwilling to give generously to the poor." If he had looked beneath the surface of his good deeds, the man would have been terrified of the requirement of God's holy Law, in that he was violating it all! Leon Morris observes, "When a man takes seriously the requirements of the law he is on the way to coming to Christ" (*Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 267).

In our attempts to share the gospel, we are often too quick to share the good news before people feel the awful weight of the bad news. When we are talking with a person who trusts in his own goodness to get him into heaven, we need to emphasize the holy Law of God which the person has violated, even though he is blind to that fact. The Bible says that to keep the whole law, but to violate it in one point, is to be guilty of it all (James 2:10). You can live a perfect life, but if you sin just once, you are disqualified from heaven, because God will not allow any unpardoned sinner into heaven. He must punish all sin in order to be just.

If you were driving too fast and got a ticket, you could tell the judge, "But I've never murdered anyone," and it would not get you off. You could say, "I've never robbed a bank. I've always paid my taxes. I go to church." It wouldn't matter. You broke the law and the judge will impose the penalty.

Or, suppose that you went to buy a new mirror and the clerk tried to sell you one with a crack in it. He says, "It's just a small crack. The rest of the mirror is just fine." Sorry! One crack makes a broken mirror. One sin makes a sinner and law-breaker. And we all have sinned, not just once, but repeatedly all of our lives.

People who think that they're good enough to qualify for heaven need to hold their behavior, including their thoughts, up to the standard of God's holy Law. They need to feel, as Spurgeon put it, the rope around their necks, that they stand guilty and condemned before God. One reason that we see so many superficial professions of faith in our day is that we do not use the Law as Jesus did, to convict people of how far short they have fallen from God's perfect standard.

Thus salvation by human goodness is impossible because it can never compare with God's goodness and it always falls short of God's holy Law.

- C. Salvation by human goodness is impossible because human goodness deceives us about our true heart condition.

This man was sincere in thinking that he had kept the commandments, but he was sincerely wrong! He was deceiving himself because he was not looking at things on the heart level as God does. You can sincerely believe that you are well, but if you have some internal disease that is killing you, your sincerity does not matter. You must deal with your true condition or you will die. Sincerity is not enough; we must believe God's diagnosis about the wickedness of the human heart.

This man thought that he had it pretty well together. He just needed to do another thing or two to nail down eternal life. But Jesus sought to show him that in his heart, he was an idolater. He worshipped his money more than God.

The Bible repeatedly warns us about the danger of money. In the parable of the sower, the thorns that choked out the word represent "worries and riches and the pleasures of this life" (Luke 8:14). In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus described a man who had plenty of goods stored up, but he had neglected his soul (12:16-21). Paul warned that "those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim. 6:9). Money is like a loaded gun. It can be a useful thing if you're careful with it. But, at all times it is a dangerous thing that you must treat with caution. Like guns, money can only be handled by sinners. It can lull us into thinking that all is well because we live comfortably, but we forget that eternity is a heartbeat away. If you protest that money is no problem for you, I would say that you do not see your heart as God sees it. Even those who are generous with their money may deceive themselves into thinking that because they give away so much, God will overlook their sin.

But no one can get into heaven by his own goodness. Good people must abandon trusting in their own goodness if they want to get right with God. Salvation by human goodness is impossible.

3. Good people are saved by turning from their sin and trusting in God alone to save them.

This man lacked one thing (18:22), but in lacking that one thing, he lacked everything. What was that one thing? He needed to sell everything, give the money away, and come follow Jesus. What? Did Jesus mean that he could earn salvation by doing this one thing? If so, this would be the first and only man in history of whom that was true. Scripture is uniformly clear that salvation is by grace through faith apart from works (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

So why did Jesus lay this heavy requirement on this man? He did it because a man cannot cling to his idols and genuinely trust in Christ for salvation at the same time. Saving faith is inseparable from repentance, which means, turning from our sins. Mark 1:15 sums up Jesus' message: "Repent and believe in the gospel." Repentance loosens our grasp on our sin; faith lays hold of God for deliverance. Repentance and saving faith always go together.

Jesus was telling this rich young ruler what He taught elsewhere, that if your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. If you don't, you will go to hell (see Matt. 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-50). In other words, sin condemns us. We must repent of it or it will drag us down to hell. You can't cling to your sin with one hand and to the cross of Christ with the other.

Picture a man in an upper story of a burning high-rise apartment. This has been his home and he loves it. But the building is on fire and if he wants to save his life, he must give it up. If he clings to his things, he will die in the smoke and flames. Repentance is his turning from those things to the open window. Faith is his jumping out the window into the safety net which the firemen have spread below. Both are necessary for him to be saved.

As Jesus makes plain here, no man can save himself; but, "the things impossible with men are possible with God" (18:27). This means that we dare not trust in our repentance to save us. We dare not trust in our trust to save us. We can only *trust in God* to save us. Salvation is totally God's doing, not at all our doing. We must cast ourselves totally on Him, not trusting at all in ourselves. Thus,

Good people are saved by abandoning trust in their own goodness, by turning from their sin and trusting in God alone to save them.

Conclusion

In 1882, C. H. Spurgeon wrote something that precisely fits our times as well (exact source unknown):

A very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of peace before they have known their misery; restoring the prodigal to the Father's house, and never making him say, 'Father, I have sinned.' How can he be healed who is not sick, or he be satisfied with the bread of life who is not hungry? The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised.... Everything in this age is shallow.... The consequence is that men leap into religion, and then leap out again. Unhumbled they came to the church, unhumbled they remained in it, and unhumbled they go from it.

Perhaps I am speaking to some good people today. You've assumed that your good deeds will get you into heaven. But you must see that your own goodness can never save you. You must further see the awful sins of your heart as God sees them. Perhaps there is one sin that you refuse to let go. The Lord is saying, "Let it go! Sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." Turn from your sin and trust in Christ alone who can save. Even though this rich young ruler went away sorrowful and unsaved, Jesus knew what He was doing as an evangelist. I pray your response will not be like that of this young man.

Discussion Questions

1. Some say that requiring repentance for salvation adds works to salvation by free grace alone. Agree/disagree? Why?
2. Are we too quick to press for decisions and to give assurance of salvation? How can we know when a person is truly ready?
3. What lessons can we learn from Jesus' evangelistic method with this young man?
4. Do we as rich Americans adequately appreciate the spiritual dangers of riches? How can we be more on guard?

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