

Who Then Can Be Saved?

We have here an account of the Rich Young Ruler coming to Jesus. He came not as a little child might come, and as the Lord requires, but with all the pride and presumption of a natural, self-righteous man. His meeting with the Lord is recounted by Matthew, Mark and Luke. In addition to a very interesting dialogue between the Lord and the young man, the conversation proves a great puzzle for the Lord's disciples regarding the nature of salvation. It becomes another lesson in their understanding of the gospel of free and sovereign grace.

Running to Jesus

This nameless young man ran to the Lord eagerly. Evidently, he had heard about Jesus and did not want to miss the opportunity of speaking to Him. In every way this man appears to be sincere and thoughtful. He was polite and respectful and brought a question that spoke of more serious considerations than the usual chicanery of the Pharisees.

An important question!

When the young man met Jesus, the Saviour was on the road to Jerusalem. The nature of his approach and the urgency of his question suggests he had come prepared for his brief encounter with the Lord. He asked, "Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" This question reveals a lot about the young man's belief and assumptions. He believed there was an afterlife, but like many he was thoroughly entangled in works-righteousness and, as becomes clear, self-righteousness.

Something still missing

Yet it is also clear he had a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction. In the opinion of others he was a man of great privilege; in his own opinion, a man of great achievement, but the very fact this question is asked of the Lord Jesus Christ betrays self-doubt. He hoped but did not know if all was well with his soul. This is the classic dilemma of the legalist. They are never sure if they have done enough.

We deal with God on His terms

The response of the Lord to this young man is very illuminating. First, the Lord challenged the young man's assumptions. Certainly, the Lord Jesus Christ is good, but did the young man appreciate why? Knowing the proper deity of Jesus Christ leads to a true understanding of His work and accomplishments. If a man or a woman is to be saved they will first discern the saving work of the Godman. They come to Him for salvation, not validation. This was the Saviour's first lesson.

Under the Law

Next, the Lord turned the youth back to the Law. Like many others the rich young ruler mistakenly imagined personal obedience and 'doing one's duty' recommends a sinner to God. He had taken his duties seriously but he did not understand them spiritually. The Lord would have him know that the Law, being designed and appointed to accuse and condemn, can never bring life. It is not a ladder to life for a sinner but a measure of how far short we are from the perfect holiness of God.

All the book of the Law

Furthermore, failure in one part of the Law is failure in all. It took the Lord merely to open up one small detail of the true spiritual meaning of the Law to expose the vanity of this young man's character. As reality dawned and the penny dropped, the self-confidence of the youth crumbled and sorrow filled its place. What the young man feared was true, all his obedience was not enough to inherit eternal life. He had done all he could and it was not nearly enough.

What is impossible with man ...

Later as the disciples reflected upon the incident their old prejudices returned. Why did not the Lord embrace this man? He was exactly the kind of person needed for their movement! He was young, rich, talented, conscientious and eager to identify with Christ's kingdom; he possessed qualities that indicated God's blessing. Was not he a most eligible candidate? If such a one cannot enter the kingdom of God, who can? Who then can be saved?

... is possible with God

Gently and patiently the Lord again turned the minds of His disciples to free grace. “With men it is impossible” he said, “but not with God: for with God all things are possible.” This young man had so very much, but he did not have faith and without faith it is impossible to please God.

The end of the story?

Perhaps someday the Lord did give him the faith he needed and by it peace about eternal life, we are not told. If so, it would not come by ‘what good thing must I do’ but by grace. Grace and eternal life is the free, sovereign gift of God alone. Men look to duties performed to make them first in line for heaven. It is a popular and persuasive idea to the natural man. But God delights to save sinners, and the chiefest amongst them, at that.

Amen

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