

Emptiness and Eternal Life

Matthew 19:16-30

Last August, I did a series with my students called “Can I Ask That?” Before this series, students were encouraged to write down any questions they had about Christianity or personal faith or sin or the Bible. One of the questions I received formed the foundation of this message: “If I believe in God while reading and praying and staying faithful, why do I feel empty and disconnected?” In my experience, this is a common question for students, but I believe this is a common question for adults, as well. “Why do I feel empty? I’m doing the right things. I try to pray. I come to church. I read my Bible. Why do I still feel empty?”

We live in a time when emptiness is all around us. People look to any number of things to find something that will fill the emptiness. Some look to a relationship to fill that void. Some look to a new job or a corner office. Some look to friends, filling their waking moments with noise to drown out the emptiness. Some turn up the volume by engaging in destructive behavior. Even churchgoers and Christ-followers are not immune. Some of us serve wherever we can in the church, not always out of a desire to serve God, but in hopes of finding meaning and purpose to fill the emptiness. Some of us look to a new Bible reading plan or a new resource to study, thinking this will be the thing that finally pushes me forward into joy in Christ.

This morning, I want to examine the cause of and solution to this emptiness. Now, there are a few things I want us to keep in mind. First, every Christ-follower experiences this empty feeling at different times. One of the things Pastor Matt said in his time here that stuck with me was this: “Spiritual growth is not linear.” We all have

days and weeks and maybe even months when we feel like we're stuck and not growing closer to Christ. If you are already thinking this sounds like you, understand that you are not alone. We all experience this and when that time comes, we can all benefit from examining ourselves as we will discuss this morning. Second is that every unbeliever, everyone who has not surrendered his or her life to Christ, will feel this emptiness consistently. Sometimes you may be able to push it down and suppress it for a length of time. You may be able to convince yourself that you don't feel empty at all. But the emptiness is always there because, as we will see this morning, you do not possess eternal life. Third is our definition of eternal life. This will be very important as we read our text this morning. Usually, when we say eternal life, we think of the life we will live after death in the presence of God eternally. While this is accurate, this definition ignores a key truth: Eternal life begins here on Earth in the moment you accept Christ as your Savior and Lord. Eternal life doesn't just mean eternity in heaven; it also means joy and peace and purpose in Christ today. We must hold both of these meanings in mind as we examine the Scriptures this morning.

In Matthew 19, we will be looking at the record of an encounter between Jesus and what Matthew describes as a rich young ruler. This man, likely a political leader or magistrate, came to Jesus seeking eternal life, but he left empty-handed because he couldn't follow through on our main point this morning. Our main idea, which I failed to put in your outline, is this: To inherit eternal life and enjoy fullness in Christ, I must surrender the throne of my heart. Read with me:

16 And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" **17** And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." **18** He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, **19** Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **20** The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" **21** Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." **22** When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:16-22)

The Myth of Good Works

The first thing we hear from this rich young ruler is a question: "What good must I do to have eternal life?" Here, we see a man who is fully bought in to the myth of good works. All of us carry the myth of good works within ourselves. All of us believe at some time or another, to some extent or another, that good works will save us. Why do so many pastors and theologians teach on the topic of legalism? Why are there so many books written on the topic of legalism? Because all of us, unless we preach the Gospel to ourselves consistently, tend to slide toward the belief that through our good and spiritual works, we can tip the scales in our favor and make God happy with us. It even bleeds over into other parts of our lives. For example, when I do something dumb or wrong, which is very often, and my wife gets upset with me, I'll sometimes go into the kitchen and start doing the dishes because somewhere in my legalist mind, I'm convinced that by doing the dishes, I can work my way back into her favor.

Here in Matthew 19, this young ruler has turned salvation into a divine to-do list, and he comes seeking Jesus' help in checking items off. Jesus, though, is having none of it and he responds to this young man in such a way as to tear down the idea that inheriting eternal life and experiencing fullness of joy in Christ is accomplished through good works. Jesus responds in verse 17, "Why do you call me good? There is only one

who is good.” Is Jesus here denying his own goodness? Is he denying his divinity and his nature as God incarnate? Absolutely not. Jesus knows exactly who He is, but this ruler does not. He does not yet understand that Jesus is the Son of God and Jesus uses this to point out the futility of his question.

In his response, Jesus makes clear that all are sinful except for God. “Why then,” he asks the ruler, “are you asking a rabbi for advice on earning eternal life?” “All people are sinful, including you, young ruler,” Jesus points out. There are multiple problems with this man’s approach. He is asking what he perceives to be just a rabbi for advice on eternal life, because he is blind to the fact that the Son of God stands before him. And, he’s asking about eternal life under the assumption that he can do enough good works to earn it for himself. “There is only one who is good,” Jesus says. But as we will see, the myth of good works prevents this rich young ruler from acknowledging his own sin.

Jesus continues, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother, and, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “What’s going on here?” we may ask. Is Jesus reinforcing the ruler’s idea of works-based righteousness? Not at all. Jesus is introducing law before gospel, but He is doing this in order to impress on this man the high standard required by God and the absolute futility of seeking to obtain eternal life on his own merits. Recall that Jesus has already taught on the topic of the Law and the commandments back in Matthew 5, during the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, do not murder, and whoever

murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister will be subject to the court. Whoever says, 'You fool,' will be subject to hellfire." "You have heard that it was said, do not commit adultery. But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

By telling the young ruler to keep the commandments in order to earn eternal life, Jesus is making plain that one cannot earn eternal life. No one can keep the commandments perfectly. This is why Jesus came to earth; to live the perfect life that none of us can. Apparently though, this rich young ruler missed Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, because he confidently declares, "I have kept all these." Under these terms, Jesus, I qualify for eternal life! So tell me, why do I still feel that emptiness? "What do I still lack?"

The myth of good works binds us in a life of emptiness. It binds us in a life of loudly declaring our qualification for eternal life while still wondering why we don't feel joyful and complete like we think we should. It binds us in a life of striving and straining and digging deep to accomplish that which we can never accomplish, and which Jesus already has.

The Danger of Idolatry

In the face of the young ruler's confidence that he has kept all the commandments perfectly and therefore qualifies for eternal life, Jesus presses the point further and exposes the idolatry that is ruling this man's heart. In response to his question, "What do I still lack," Jesus replies, "If you want to be perfect (or complete),

go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” And Scripture tells us that “When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.”

Let’s examine again what Jesus is doing. Jesus is an expert at exposing a person’s true heart. Jesus instructs this rich young ruler to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Him. Understand that Jesus is not setting forth universal requirements for salvation. He isn’t telling us that poverty is the gateway to eternal life. He is instead exposing the idolatry that is ruling this man’s heart. In telling him to sell all he has and give to the poor, Jesus identifies the thing that this rich young ruler loves most and tells him to leave it behind. Jesus makes clear that to inherit eternal life and to experience fullness in Christ, he must vacate the throne of his heart and give Jesus his rightful place. If the man’s great love had been family, Jesus would have asked him to leave his family behind. If his great love had been status, Jesus would have asked him to resign his position as ruler.

All of us have a throne within our hearts and whatever sits on that throne rules over our lives. And all of us struggle daily with the dozens of things that fight to be the one sitting on the throne. We live in a world that constantly supplies would-be kings. “Money is king and you need more of it to be happy and successful. You’ll only be happy if you’re in the right relationship and give everything of yourself to that person. Get your name recognized and up in lights. Power is all the world honors and don’t worry about who you step on on the way up. You need to have more fun. Fun is what life is all about, regardless of consequences.” Jesus, in these Scriptures, however, makes it plain that the only way to inherit eternal life, the only way to find joy in your

day-to-day, the only way to find purpose and meaning, the only way to find fulfillment, the only way to fill that emptiness inside you is to allow Him to kick those things off the throne of your heart and to take His rightful place.

If the desire for money rules your heart, Jesus calls you to take radical action to remove it. If the desire for power and popularity rules your heart, Jesus calls you to surrender it. If the desire to do what makes you happy rules your heart, Jesus calls you to abandon it. It doesn't matter what is. If it's family, your boyfriend, your girlfriend, sexual gratification, greed, obsession with your looks, social status, grades, your dedication to good works, your activism in important causes, you must surrender the throne. Ultimately, Jesus is calling us to remove **ourselves** from the thrones of our hearts, because all of these things are extensions of our selfishness. All of these things are extensions of me. It's me, Jesus. I'm the one who sits on the throne of my heart. I'm the one who rules and reigns. And Jesus extends the same call to us that he did to the rich young ruler. Abandon the throne and come, follow me.

We see, in verse 22, the young man's response. He went away grieving, because he had many possessions. He was unwilling to give up the throne. He was unwilling to surrender his money and possessions in order to gain eternal life. He sacrificed his opportunity, standing before the Son of God, to find the peace and joy and fulfillment he had been searching for because he refused to give up that which he loved most. He refused to allow Jesus first place. He insisted on remaining king of his own heart.

The Consequences of Kingship

23 And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. **24** Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” **25** When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” **26** But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:23-26)

The consequence of kingship is that it will leave us empty. It will rob us of eternal life and of joy in Christ. When Jesus speaks to his disciples of the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven, we must understand that he is not only speaking of riches as a hinderance to eternal life. He is speaking of whatever rules our hearts. He simply uses the illustration of riches because his disciples had just witnessed this exchange and had seen the young ruler walk away from Jesus because of his desire to keep his wealth.

Jesus’ metaphor of a camel passing through the eye of a needle was likely a Jewish adaptation of a Persian proverb conveying the impossibility of something. Other interpreters have attempted to find an alternate meaning for this saying in order to soften Jesus’ teaching. Some have claimed that a gate entering Jerusalem was called the Needle Gate because it was so narrow that a camel driver would have to dismount and remove any baggage from the camel’s sides in order for all to pass through. This interpretation is unlikely as no evidence of any such gate has been found and any competent camel driver would likely just find another gate. Others claim that the word “camel” is a misinterpretation of the Hebrew word for a large rope or cable, but a large rope could pass no more easily through the eye of a needle than a camel could, and its unlikely that the same word was misinterpreted in all three Gospels that contain this

story.¹ No, Jesus intent and meaning here are plain. Men and women cannot remain on the thrones of their hearts and expect to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is as likely as a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

Jesus' use of a rich man in this statement added an extra layer of weight for His disciples. Jewish tradition taught that a person could purchase redemption of sins by giving alms, so the more riches a person had, the more alms he could give, the more sacrifices he could offer, and the greater advantage he had in purchasing redemption. When the disciples heard Jesus' statement, it's no wonder they responded as they did. Matthew tells us that they were "utterly astonished" and asked, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus' response clarifies his meaning. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Jesus' clarification in the aftermath of his meeting with the rich young ruler shows us the consequences of kingship. The ruler insisted on remaining king of his own heart, free to pursue and enjoy his wealth. But this insistence on kingship led him away from the One who could give him true joy, satisfaction, and purpose. In our own lives, insistence on remaining on the thrones of our hearts will cost us the joy of salvation and the promise of eternal life. It will lead that empty feeling we've been discussing this morning. It will lead us to wonder why we can do all the good deeds and follow all the Christian traditions and still feel empty and disconnected from God.

If you are sitting here this morning and you have never surrendered your life to Christ, never repented of your sin and asked Jesus to be your Savior and Lord of your life, that emptiness is going to be a daily experience for you because you are still sitting

¹ Credit to Danny Akin for this information.

on the throne of your heart. There are no two ways around that truth and no amount of good works can fill the need within you for repentance and regeneration in Christ. An important truth that we must not forget is that the rich young ruler did good religious things. He endeavored to follow the commandments. He sought out a rabbi for advice on gaining eternal life. He likely attended the temple and made sacrifices like any good Jew. However, good deeds are not necessarily an indicator that Jesus is sitting on the throne of one's heart.

For the Christ-follower in the room, this truth is the same. Though I've put my faith in Christ as my Savior and Lord, and though I am regenerated in Christ and will enjoy eternal life in heaven when my life on earth comes to an end, it is all too easy for me to place myself back on the throne of my heart and, in doing so, lose the joy, peace, and fulfillment that come from a relationship with Christ. I can be about the business of the church, I can open my Bible and read, I can give to charitable causes, but if I have removed Christ from first place in my heart and put myself there instead, I will come away from those things feeling empty inside.

If you feel like the writer of our original question, wondering why you still feel empty despite all your efforts to do good works, it is time to examine your heart. Perhaps you are simply in one of those seasons of life that remind us that spiritual growth is not linear. Possibly you are striving to keep Jesus on the throne as your great love, but life in a sinful and fallen world has dealt you circumstances that make remaining close to Christ a daily battle. Jesus never promised that the Christian life would always be an easy one and every day of your walk as a Christ-follower will not

feel as perfect. Jesus does promise, however, that He walks with us through those trials and stands ready to provide supernatural peace and joy in His timing.

However, if you examine your heart this morning and ask the Holy Spirit to do the same, you may find that you are insisting on keeping the kingship of your heart. Whether you have never surrendered your life to Christ or you have done so, but have, as is human nature, placed yourself back on the throne, the result will be the same. The consequence of kingship from anyone but the King of Kings will always be emptiness, grieving, and searching for life. “With men, this is impossible.”

The second half of this statement, however, brings us to our fourth point.

The Promise of Surrender

“With men, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Our Scripture continues:

27 Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” 28 Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world,[b] when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold[c] and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Matthew 19:27-30)

Peter, very naturally, wants to know what will become of him and his friends. “See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?” Perhaps in this moment, Peter is feeling doubt and fear. Maybe he’s asking Jesus, “If a rich man cannot enter the kingdom of God except with great difficulty, what will become of us who don’t have anything to our names?” Or possibly Peter is making reference to what Christ demanded of the rich young ruler. “We’ve already done what you asked him to

do, Jesus. Does that mean we have eternal life?” Whether Peter is expressing doubt or expectation, Jesus delivers a promise. The first part of his promise speaks directly to His disciples, promising that they will rule with him on twelve thrones at the renewal of all things. The second part of His promise speaks to all of us who come after.

“Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name,” Jesus says. Everyone who has done what the rich young ruler could not. Everyone who has left behind their first, great loves for the sake of Jesus. Everyone who has abandoned the thrones of their hearts and allowed Jesus to take his rightful place. All of these will “receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life,” according to the promise of Jesus.

The promise of surrender is eternal life. Eternal life in heaven in the presence of God after death, yes, but also an eternal life that begins now and brings peace, joy, purpose, and meaning to a life of emptiness. When the thief on the cross surrendered his agenda that placed him there in the first place and threw himself on the mercy of Jesus, he received eternal life. The other thief, who chose to remain on his own throne, shrouded in his anger and bitterness, did not. When James and John left their father and their fishing business behind, they found lasting fulfillment. When Matthew left behind his tax collector’s booth to follow Jesus, he found joy. When Andrew left behind his mentor, John the Baptist, to follow Jesus, he found peace. When Paul left behind his life as a Pharisee and a zealot, he found purpose. Each of these received a hundred times more than what they gave up. The same can be said for you. Jesus’ promises are always fulfilled. The promise of surrender is always eternal life in Christ.

Conclusion

Ask the Spirit to examine your heart this morning. If you came in feeling empty, or if you feel that emptiness throughout your days despite all your best efforts at filling it, you may have something other than Jesus occupying the throne of your heart. Ask the Spirit to reveal what's ruling your heart. Have you fallen victim to the myth of good works? Have you placed an idol, an extension of yourself, on the throne? Have you made something the world offers your great love? If so, remove that idol. Return to Christ and make Him your first love. Allow him to rule over your heart and grant His promise of eternal life.

If you realize this morning that you've never repented of your sin and surrendered your life to Christ, now is the time. The consequences of kingship will never change, but the promise of surrender will also never change. If you are a teenager, a young adult, or an elder with grandchildren, the promise is the same. In verse 30, Jesus tells His disciples that "many who are first will be last, and the last first." He goes on to more fully explain this in the parable of the vineyard workers and His meaning is this: All who place their faith in Christ partake equally of the eternal life He promises, whether they arrive early or late. Your age, your past, your present, your station in life do not disqualify you from the eternal life Jesus offers.

Regardless of your situation: Christ-follower who has fallen prey to the temptation to sit on the throne or unbeliever who has never responded to Jesus invitation to life, the action you must take is the same. Abandon the throne and let Christ rule and reign.