

# The Tragedy of the Rich Man

Matthew 19:13-26

15 August 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** What do I need to do to get eternal life?

**Big Idea:** We're saved by what Jesus has done and not what we do.

At this point in Matthew's biography of Jesus' life, Jesus and his disciples are headed towards Jerusalem.

Jesus is going there knowing that he will die on a cross to save humankind from the consequences of their sin.

The cross will mark the beginning of a new era, the opening up of God's kingdom to all who place their trust in Jesus.

So it's no wonder that on this journey, Jesus is explaining what it means to be part of his kingdom.

We've spent the last three weeks looking at a conversation between Jesus, some Pharisees and then his disciples.

It turned into a bit of a miniseries on gender, marriage, divorce and singleness as we looked at the first twelve verses in chapter nineteen three times.

Jesus showed us how God created marriage and gender to be in the beginning.

That lay the foundation for understanding how we should think about divorce in the kingdom.

Then Jesus addresses his disciples' conclusion that it's better not to be married and so we looked at singleness as well.

Today's passage takes us in a bit of a different direction.

We're going to see that **we're saved by what Jesus has done and not what we do.**

We're going to see this in three pictures.

- Insufficient Children (vv 13-15)
- A Self-Sufficient Man (vv 16-22)
- A Sufficient Saviour (vv23-26)

## Insufficient Children (vv 13-15)

This section begins with a curious incident that involves children.

I say that it's curious because at first it seems to be a bit random.

Yes, Jesus has just been talking about marriage and so in one sense children are a natural next step.

But this incident doesn't fit so much with the disciples' conclusion about singleness.

I think that the point is that Jesus is actually setting up a very important principle for us to understand the rest of this section through.

People are bringing children to see Jesus.

If you've been kicking around churches for a while, you've probably seen the pictures added into Bibles of Jesus looking like he's in an Anne Geddes photo with his carefully manicured beard and shoulder-length hair, sitting with a snot-free kid on his knee, surrounded by other equally unblemished children and cute animals.

It was pretty common in those times for people to come to a great religious teacher and ask the rabbi to bless their little cherubs by placing a hand on them and praying.

This was an especially common practice on the Day of Atonement.

But we're told in verse thirteen that the disciples aren't pleased with what's going on, rebuking those who were bringing their billy lids to Jesus.

We're not told exactly why the disciples did this, but I don't think it was just because they were baptists (which I think they were) and they didn't want anyone to make the mistake of getting a blessing confused with an infant baptism (which I think is wise).

It may be as simple as the disciples not wanting to get distracted from getting to Jesus' big finale in Jerusalem since they were expecting him to rule and reign, rather than die on the cross.

Perhaps they just thought that these blessings were getting in the road. Literally.

I think it's much more likely that they thought that these kids weren't deserving of Jesus' time and attention.

It was only a page or two earlier, at the start of chapter eighteen, that Jesus talked about children.

At that time, the disciples wanted to know who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Clearly his teaching hadn't sunk in yet because it looks like they still don't understand that to get into the kingdom, you've got to have the low position of a child.

In ancient Jewish thinking, children were very much valued and treasured.

Psalms 127 tells us that children are a blessing and a reward.

But kids were valued in more of a seen and not heard kind of way.

There was no sense that children were equal with adults, something that's picked up on in the New Testament when Paul tells children to obey their parents in the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Children certainly didn't run families.

My parents certainly weren't perfect, but we always knew that they loved us, cared for us and wanted the best for us.

They worked hard to provide for us and give us opportunities.

But it was always clear to us that us kids weren't adults.

On the rare occasions we'd get a treat of soft drink on a Saturday night, there'd be two cans which we never expected to be shared equally.

One for Dad and one for the kids to share.

Now and then, Dad would also use iconic one-liners like, "Scram jam, before I spread ya," "Rack off small change before I spend you," and "If I wanted the pig to grunt, I'd rattle the bucket."

We weren't in any doubt that there were some things that it wasn't appropriate for kids to share in and comment on.

The shock and disbelief some might have at hearing that shows how far we've come in a generation or two.

My observation is that it's now not uncommon for kids to get an equal say, even run the family and set the agenda.

It certainly wasn't that way in the ancient world.

I'm not sure that Jesus is necessarily critiquing the disciples' or his culture's understanding of the place and role of children in a family here, but he IS clearly saying that children shouldn't be turned away from the kingdom.

Jesus doesn't tell the small change to go away or he'll spend them and he certainly doesn't lack time or care or space for them.

The Christian faith isn't adults' business and so we don't want to put any barriers in place that would stop a child from entering the kingdom.

We reject the assertions of atheists like Richard Dawkins that we should teach kids a solid diet of his religion of choice, atheism, until they become adults.

That's why we teach our kids in family devotions, in Sunday School and in daily life as we seek to live out what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus goes even further, though he doesn't say that they're part of his kingdom or the covenant community.

He says that these kids being brought to him are and object lesson that demonstrates what his kingdom is like.

In verse fourteen, we read, "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

What does he mean by that?

This's the heart of what Jesus is getting at.

He means that the kingdom doesn't just belong to people of status.

Smart people, beautiful people, impressive people.

His kingdom belongs to people who have the characteristics of children in the ancient world.

People who haven't done anything to deserve his blessing.

In fact, people who aren't even looking for blessing but simply receive it.

Perhaps most of all, he takes people who are dependant on himself.

The kingdom belongs to people are dependent on his blessing because they are insufficient on their own.

So, Jesus places his hands on the kids and blesses them before moving on.

Jesus still chose to bless them, even though they weren't sufficient on their own.

## **A Self-Sufficient Man (vv 16-22)**

It seems like everyone's full of questions in this section.

Another man then comes up to Jesus and asks yet another question in verse sixteen:

**Matthew 19:16b** NIV11 "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

This's a great question and a not-so-great question all at the same time.

The man assumes – rightly – that there's eternal life, life for the next age, life after death.

And he's worried about it – something that doesn't even cross the mind of a significant number of people we rub shoulders with every day.

The idea that this life is all there is seems to be pretty much standard, or at the very least we live now as if there won't be in life after death.

In about three or four weeks, the Queensland Government are going to be introducing euthanasia legislation into parliament.

Sorry, I'll be politically correct, voluntary assisted dying legislation.

I'm meeting with our local MP tomorrow morning to talk about it and while it's not easy to get an appointment at the moment, I think it'd be great if you tried to as well.

Because what you believe about euthanasia depends on your religious beliefs.

Voluntarily assisted dying only makes sense if there's no life after death.

It's only worth ending the pain now if it really does end the pain you're going to experience.

But if eternal judgment awaits those who are unrepentant, cutting your opportunity to repent short by ending your life isn't a good thing.

As I heard the VAD legislation being discussed recently, I kept hearing people say things like, "People's made up opinions from a made-up book shouldn't come into this discussion."

In other words – we're in control of our lives, not God – and so Christians should butt out.

Not a surprising position for someone who's in rebellion against God, but a position that has massive consequences.

But as far as I'm aware, science can't tell us what happens after death, which means that everyone's opinion about it is a matter of faith.

It's a matter of faith, of belief, of trust that there's nothing or something after death whether you're Christian, atheist or Calathumpian.

To think that there's nothing after death is a pretty big assumption.

An assumption many of those around us make, but not this man.

The second thing this man gets right is that while he knows that there's life after death, he's not sure whether he's got access to it.

Actually, it seems to be his working assumption that he doesn't!

Most people would put it in slightly different wording, but if you were bold enough to ask your neighbour if they're going to heaven, many would assume that they are.

But not this guy.

The third thing worth noting is that he asks the wrong question and that clearly shows us his expectation.

His question is, "What do I need to do?"

This's the key to what this bloke's thinking.

He wants to know what he's got to DO, that there's something that he's got to DO to get into heaven.

There must be a good work that he can do to ensure that he'll get entry.

Two letters that explain how Christianity is different to every other religion are the letters "NE".

Every other religion is about what you have to "DO".

Christianity is about what God has DONE.

See, the difference is the "NE".

There's nothing that you can DO to get eternal life.

That's why Jesus is going to the cross.

Jesus died on the cross because the penalty for sin is death.

But Jesus didn't die to pay for his own sin.

Jesus was the perfect Son of God who never did even a single thing wrong.

He had no sin of his own to pay for.

He died to pay the penalty for OUR sin, if you put your trust in him.

It's called the great exchange.

Jesus took on our sin and we receive his righteousness.

Christians don't need to do anything but depend on what Jesus has already done.

Entry into Jesus' kingdom isn't achieved by doing but by receiving.

You simply have to receive what Jesus has done for you, just like the children who received his blessing.

This man doesn't have the kind of faith that depends on another.

It all depends on what he can do and unless he turns from himself though, he's got Buckley's chance of getting into heaven.

Jesus responds in a way that lovingly but clearly points this out.

Why is he asking Jesus' opinion?

Jesus is the Son of God, but does this man really recognise who Jesus is?

Jesus isn't saying that he's not God, but now's not the moment to shine the spotlight on himself in that way.

In fact, when we get down to verse 21, we find that following Jesus IS the right response of obedience to God.

He wants to point the man to the fact that there's only one who's good – that's God himself.

Why do you ask ME? Hasn't God already said?

Jesus tells this man to look at what God's already said.

"If you want to enter life, then keep the commandments."

Do what God's said needs to be done.

"Which commandments?" the guy asks in verse eighteen.

And Jesus quotes from the ten commandments and then he takes a bit from Leviticus as well.

You can just about visualise the man nodding his head as he mentally ticks off each commandment Jesus lists.

Is he a good person? Of course he is!

The bloke reckons that he's kept all of those.

Give the man a Mintie!

No doubt he as a very pious man in many ways, but it really does seem doubtful that he's really kept all of those commandments, but in his own mind he has.

Then again, in Philippians 3:6 the apostle Paul says that he thought he was blameless before he met Jesus too.

He clearly didn't know about Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Scribes and the Pharisees tried their absolute best to keep all of the 613 commandments in Torah.

But Jesus says that to enter his kingdom, you need a righteousness that EXCEEDS the Scribes and the Pharisees.<sup>2</sup>

The reason they thought they kept all the commandments is because they were always looking for the minimum requirement.

What's the bare minimum I need to do to be able to say that I've done it?

Jesus, however, taught the Law's maximum application.

This man thought that he hadn't murdered because he'd never taken a person's life.

But he'd looked anger.

He'd never had an affair with another man's wife, so he hadn't committed adultery, had he?

Wrong. Jesus that if you look at another woman in order to get her to lust, then you've already committed adultery.

That's the maximum application of the law, but Jesus doesn't even go there on this occasion.

Jesus doesn't correct him and instead goes for the jugular in a different way.

This's a bloke who's depending solely on his good works.

He really doesn't think that he's got anything to worry about in that department, but he still doesn't know what he lacks.

He knows that there's something, but not what that something is.

He still thinks that it's the elusive X factor.

He's right, there is something that he lacks.

We find out in verse 22 that he had great wealth.

Jesus' answer is famous.

**Matthew 19:21** NIV11 <sup>21</sup> Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

He thought he just needed to do something more.

Jesus is saying that something needs to be taken away from what he has.

It's so much harder to give something up than gaining what you don't already have.

Jesus was saying that he couldn't rely on anything other than Jesus.

THAT'S how you get treasure in heaven.

This came as a bit of a shock to the poor man.

Give up everything he has to follow Jesus?

That's a big call, yet one that Jesus gave his disciples earlier, sending them out without anything in chapter 10.

Following Jesus requires undivided loyalty and full-hearted obedience

And the conclusion is amongst some of the saddest words in Scripture.

**Matthew 19:22** NIV11 <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Now, if you look at the commandments Jesus listed, you'll notice that Jesus has done something really interesting.

He's left some out and he's quoted others out of order.

Sometimes, it's what's left out that really counts.

It's like the famous John West catchcry – "It's the tuna John West rejects, that makes John West tuna the best."

He quotes commandments six, seven, eight, nine and then five, in that order, but he doesn't quote any of the first four commandments which are all about how to relate to God.

And he doesn't quote number ten – the commandment about coveting what someone else has.

Even when he quotes the second greatest commandment – Leviticus 19:18 – he doesn't quote the greatest commandment to love the Lord your God.

**Matthew 19:18** NIV11 <sup>18</sup> Jesus replied, “ ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony,

By asking him to give up his money, Jesus shows that the man kept some of the commandments, but not all of them.

He wasn't really on safe territory at all.

He didn't follow the tenth commandment about not wanting you neighbour's stuff.

He didn't follow the first four commandments about putting God first.

See, there's a sense in which money actually isn't the issue.

What he did with his riches simply showed what was really going on in his heart.

He didn't really put God first.

But friends, are we really any different?

Do we really put Jesus first?

Or do we order our lives with job first, then kids, then leisure activities.

Where does the kingdom really come in our priorities?

When you look at how you fill the timetable of your week, what really comes first?

It's all very well to pat yourself on the back for keeping the minimum requirements of some commandments, but do you really maximally apply them all?

This man wanted to be self-sufficient.

He thought that he was and yet Jesus shows that he wasn't.

We all want to be self-sufficient because that's essentially what sin is – telling God that we don't need him.

All of us want to be self-sufficient, which is why we all need a Saviour.

He wasn't at all dependent like those little children, humbly coming to Jesus.

He thought that there was something he needed to do.

## **A Sufficient Saviour (vv23-26)**

Finally, Jesus shows that he's the sufficient Saviour.

Jesus turns to his disciples at this point.

He's got something hard for them to hear.

He tells them that it's hard for someone who's rich to enter the kingdom.

So hard, in fact, that it's almost impossible.

We know that wealth can buy you lots of things but can make being a Christian quite difficult.

Money and possessions can leave us with divided hearts and divided loyalties.

It can distract us so that we aren't fully obedient to Jesus.

As Jesus said earlier in the gospel:

**Matthew 6:24** NIV11 <sup>24</sup> "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

When Jesus tells the parable of the soils back in chapter thirteen, he says that the seed that falls amongst the thorns represents the deceitfulness of riches.

It's true that wealth makes it difficult to be part of God's kingdom.

Wealth can make us deeply self-reliant, rather than relying on God.

Rather than being like a dependent child, we think that we can provide for all our own needs.

Jesus illustrates this difficulty by going on to say that it's easier for a camel to fit through the eye of the needle.

A camel was one of the biggest animals known in the ancient world.

Although elephants were known in Babylon, the camel was typically the biggest in Israel.

It's meant to be absurd to think that a massive camel could possibly fit through the tiny eye of a needle.

For some reason, there's a common rumour that the eye of the needle was a gate somewhere in the ancient world.

It's said that a camel could possibly just fit through this gate if it didn't have anything on its back.

It's appealing because it allows us to water down what Jesus is saying.

That it's hard, but not really impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

However, it turns out that the story is a furbpy or at the very least that it comes from a later time than Jesus.

I think that what Jesus is saying that it's virtually impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

That's a problem for people like you and I.

We know that there are people around us who are struggling to pay their bills and put food on the table.

That's why we started Grace Care because it's an opportunity to help out people who really do need it.

But the vast majority of us are rich compared to the rest of the world.

We're rich simply because and for no reason other than we live in Australia.

Does this mean that to be obedient and really follow Jesus, you have to go and sell everything?

It's always tricky to ask a question like that because I've got a vested interest in how I answer it.

If I'm honest, I want to get out of it meaning that.

My sinful heart will look for any explanation that will allow me to get around it meaning that.

And if that's true, there are an awful lot of Christians who are being exceedingly disobedient.

Including people we would consider to be faithful preachers of the gospel who have quite large incomes and property portfolios.

But, if Jesus says that I've got to go and get rid of everything, that's what I've got to do.

At the same time, it's interesting to Jesus doesn't get Zacchaeus to sell everything, in Luke 19.

Zach does give half away and repays those he'd defrauded, but he doesn't get rid of the lot.

And Paul tells Timothy that it's not having money that's the problem, but the love of money.<sup>3</sup>

How do we make sense of this and remain faithful to Jesus?

Well, don't miss that we need to be careful about our riches.

Remember that meme that Israel Folau got into trouble for?

It's not just the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who have sex with men, thieves, drunkards, slanderers or swindlers who will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It's the greedy as well.

People should've been just as offended by that and we need to take it just as seriously as all the other sins on the list.

But we often don't.

We really believe that wealth will give us security.

We need to remind one another that wealth is uncertain.

It's a really poor saviour because it's so unreliable.

1 Timothy 6:17 NIV11 <sup>17</sup> Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Jesus is the only reliable and worthy Saviour.

The Bible doesn't advocate for being rich or poor, neither poverty nor riches, but somewhere in between.

It's not good to constantly be hungry, but too much money isn't healthy either.

One of the answers is generosity, so let me give you the church building fund details.

No. That would be an absurdly self-serving application.

The point is that to try to have enough to be able to give to those in need.<sup>4</sup>

It's easy to miss how important the disciples' response is in verse 25.

They're surprised – astonished, even – by what Jesus has said.

Why would they be so surprised and why do they come to the conclusion that it seems impossible to be saved?

We read in verse 25:

**Matthew 19:25** NIV11 <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Some of the disciples had backgrounds that meant they had wealth – like Matthew himself who earned the big dollars as a tax collector.

But many of the disciples were humble fishermen who'd given everything to follow Jesus.

It might be hard for a rich person to get into the kingdom, but surely it wouldn't be too hard for them?

Why would you think that if a rich person would find it difficult to enter the kingdom of heaven, then anyone else had no chance?

One of the things that's going on here is that there's a bit of a different understanding of wealth between then and now.

Today, being wealthy means that you've worked hard for it or you were amazingly lucky.

Wealth, in the ancient world, was considered to be a sign of blessing.

It meant that God was blessing you in this life.

If he was blessing you in this life, it was expected that he'd bless you in the next life as well.

So, if a rich person couldn't get into heaven with all the blessing that God had given them, no one could.

The disciples misunderstood, but hopefully we don't.

No man or woman qualifies for heaven on the basis of his or her own efforts and Jesus' answer addresses this.

With man it is utterly impossible to enter his kingdom.

But the gospel can and should work more powerfully in people's lives than any of us could possibly expect.

With God, and only with him, it's entirely possible.

**Matthew 19:26** NIV11 <sup>26</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Salvation is possible, not because of what we do, but because of what God has done for us.

We don't get into heaven because of what we have done, but because Jesus is the all-sufficient Saviour.

Our only hope, our only plea is that Jesus died and paid for me.

Riches won't get you into heaven.

Only the righteous blood of Jesus can do that.

## Conclusion

Our default setting, perhaps without realising it, is that we need to do something to get into heaven.

Jesus shows us that we might keep some of God's commandments – at least a little bit – but we don't keep all of them.

The disciples concluded that if a rich person can't get into heaven, then there's no hope for anyone else.

But Jesus says that our hope for eternal life doesn't depend on what we do, but what Jesus has done.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 6:1

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:20

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6:9-10

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:13

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**Big Question:** What do I need to do to get eternal life?

**Big Idea:** We're saved by what Jesus has done and not what we do.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why didn't the disciples want people bringing their kids to Jesus?
2. How was place of children in a family in ancient Jewish culture similar or different to today?
3. What assumptions does the man who comes to Jesus make about life after death?
4. Why would the man think he'd kept all the commandments in verse 18?
5. What does Jesus mean by his statement and illustration in verses 23-34?
6. How might being in the fourth richest country in the world affect the way we read and apply this passage?
7. Is it better to be poor than to be rich?
8. Why do the disciples wonder if anyone can be saved in verse 23?
9. What are the implications of Jesus' words in verse 26?