

THE RICH YOUNG RULER

A KEY TO CORRECTLY UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

By Arlen L. Chitwood

The subject at hand in the account of the rich young ruler, as given in all three synoptic gospels, is *entrance into or exclusion from the kingdom of the heavens* (Matt. 19:23, 24; Mark 10:23-25; Luke 18:24, 25). Both the text and the context *clearly* deal with issues surrounding the coming kingdom, *not*, as is often taught, with issues surrounding the gospel of the grace of God.

THE QUESTION, THE RESPONSE

The rich young ruler — a wealthy young Jew in a position of authority — asked a question within the framework of the message Christ had been proclaiming to the nation of Israel. The kingdom of the heavens was “at hand,” and this man asked what he must do *to possess, to inherit, life in this kingdom*.

Christ responded to this man’s question within the same framework as it had been asked. It was a *personal response* having to do with the same thing He had previously told His disciples relative to the salvation of their souls (relative to entering into *life in the coming age*, the Messianic Era). Christ had previously stated that in order for a disciple to enter into *life*, he must “deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24ff; cf. Matt. 19:17).

Christ dealt with two areas of the rich young ruler’s

life: 1) *keeping the commandments given through Moses*, and 2) *personal material wealth*.

The law had nothing to do with providing a means of saving unregenerate man through his obedience. Such a thought is completely foreign to any Scriptural teaching on the law or eternal salvation. No one has ever been or ever will be saved through keeping the law. And the converse of that is equally true. No one has ever been or ever will be lost through failure to keep the law. The law, given to Israel, was given to a redeemed people and had to do with rules and regulations governing the people of God within the theocracy.

Although the theocracy had long since ceased to exist in the camp of Israel (the glory had departed over six hundred years prior to this time), the shadow of regality still remained in the Divine law. And the Scribes and Pharisees — the central religious leaders of the people, the keepers and legalistic teachers of this law — were recognized by Christ as the ones occupying “Moses’ seat” (a position relative to the law and the people which corresponded to Moses’ past position in this respect [Matt. 23:2]). Thus, the nonexistence of the theocracy did not nullify the Israelites’ obligation to keep the law. Such would have been antinomianism on their part.

Christ Himself had previously said, “...one jot [‘yod,’ smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet] or one tittle [smallest part of a letter, distinguishing it from other letters] shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matt. 5:18). Thus, Christ calling this Jewish man’s attention to keeping the law was a completely natural thing to do, for the offer of the kingdom of the heavens was open to a people still living under the Mosaic economy.

The rich young ruler claimed to have kept the law from his youth up and asked Christ what he yet lacked. Christ then called attention to his personal wealth, saying that if he would be “perfect [Gk. *teleios*, a word meaning “end” or “goal,” referring contextually to the attainment of a goal]” he would need to sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor. Divesting himself of his earthly wealth in this manner would result in a transference of where his wealth would lie. Rather than continuing to possess earthly wealth, he would, because of that which had been done, *acquire heavenly wealth* — “treasure in heaven”; and the man was then to follow Christ.

The question which the rich young ruler asked as he

approached Christ is worded slightly different in Mark’s and Luke’s accounts of this event (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18). Rather than asking what he must do to “have eternal life,” as in Matthew’s account, both Mark and Luke call attention to the man using the word *inherit* — “...what shall I do to inherit eternal life.” And this would further clarify what is in view, for “eternal life,” the present possession of every believer, is *never* spoken of in Scripture as an inheritance (“inheritance” pertains to family members realizing certain rights because they are members of the family, not to individuals becoming members of the family).

INHERITING AIONIOS LIFE

Additional light along this same line is seen in both Mark’s and Luke’s accounts by how they record Christ’s response to Peter’s statement and question, which arises out of and immediately follows Christ’s dealings with and statement concerning the rich young ruler. In Mark 10:28-31 and Luke 18:28-30, Peter’s response to Christ’s previous dealings with and statement concerning the rich young ruler are given, along with Christ’s subsequent response to Peter. And in Christ’s response, rather than the expression, “inherit everlasting life,” as in Matt. 19:29, the expression, “in the world to come eternal life [Luke: ‘life everlasting’],” is used (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30).

Aionios is the word from the Greek text translated “eternal” and “everlasting” in Matt. 19:16, 29. This is the adjective equivalent of the noun *aion*, from which we derive our English word “aeon,” or “eon.” And *aion* is usually understood throughout the Greek New Testament as “an age” (though often translated “world” [KJV], e.g., Matt. 11:32; 13:39, 40; Rom. 12:2; I Cor. 2:6; Eph. 1:21).

Aionios, the adjective form of *aion*, is used seventy-one times in the Greek New Testament and has been indiscriminately translated “eternal” or “everlasting” in almost every instance in the various English versions. This word though should be understood much more often than not in the sense of “age-lasting” rather than “eternal”; and the occurrences in Matt. 19:16, 29 form two cases in point (cf. Gal. 6:8; I Tim. 6:12; Titus 1:2; 3:7).

In both Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30, the Lord used *aion* and *aionios* together in the same sense. The word “world” is a translation of the noun *aion*, and the words

“eternal” (Mark) and “everlasting” (Luke) are translations of the adjective *aionios*. The literal rendering in both verses should be, “...and in the age to come life age-lasting [*i.e.* ‘life for the coming age’].” *Having/inheriting aionios life* in Matthew’s gospel is the same as *inheriting/receiving aionios life in the world (age) to come* in Mark’s and Luke’s gospels (*cf.* Matt. 19:16, 29; Mark 10:17, 30; Luke 18:18, 30).

Since *aionios* is a word used centrally in Scripture to imply “age-lasting,” though the word can be used in the sense of “eternal” (*e.g.*, Rom. 16:26; Heb. 9:14), textual considerations must always be taken into account when properly translating and understanding this word. And textual considerations in Matt. 19:16, 29 leave no room to question exactly how *aionios* should be understood and translated in these two verses.

KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS

A Jew being told to “keep the commandments” of God in relation to required obedience for entrance into the kingdom during the past dispensation would find its parallel through a Christian being told to “keep the commandments” of Christ in relation to required obedience for entrance into the kingdom during the present dispensation. There were the commandments of God given through Moses to the people of Israel during the past dispensation when God dealt with the Jewish people, and there are the commandments of Christ given to Christians during the present dispensation when God is dealing with “the new creation” *in Christ*.

Christ told His disciples, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15; *cf.* I John 2:3, 4; 3:22; 5:2, 3). Revelation 22:14 clearly associates keeping Christ’s commandments with being allowed access to the tree of life, an access which will be necessary for those ruling and reigning with Christ (required wisdom and knowledge for carrying out regal duties will be acquired through partaking of the tree of life [*cf.* Rev. 2:7; 3:25-27]).

Then Heb. 5:9 states that Christ “became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.” Obedience to Christ would simply be obedience to His commandments, something that only a saved person would be in a position to accomplish. (The word “eternal” in Heb. 5:9 is a translation of *aionios* from the Greek text, and this

verse itself clearly shows that the word should be understood in the sense of “age-lasting” rather than “eternal.”)

Thus, when Christ told the rich young ruler to keep the commandments if he would enter into life, He meant *exactly* what He said; and when Christians are told the same thing, though the commandments of Christ rather than the commandments given through Moses are in view, the Word of God means *exactly* what it says.

Christ is the Author of the salvation to be revealed, the salvation of the soul, “*unto all them that obey him.*”

RICHES

The man with whom Christ was dealing possessed great material wealth, and Christ told him essentially the same thing that He subsequently told the disciples in response to Peter’s statement and question. If a person would enter into life, realize an inheritance in the coming kingdom, he must forsake *everything* which would stand in the way of his following Christ and bringing forth fruit (*cf.* Matt. 19:21, 29).

From the rich young ruler’s response to Christ’s statement, it is evident that he could not both *retain his material wealth* and *follow Christ*. His wealth would prevent him from doing that which was necessary for entering into life, and Christ knew this. Christ had previously told His disciples that “the deceitfulness of riches” would “choke the word [the Word of the Kingdom],” preventing an individual from bringing forth fruit (Matt. 13:22; *cf.* v. 19). And the account of the rich young ruler is a case in point.

The rich young ruler had heard the message concerning the coming kingdom, he was interested enough in having a part in the kingdom that he went to Christ and inquired of Him personally concerning the matter, but he was unwilling to pay the required price. He wanted the best of both worlds, but a person cannot serve both “God and mammon” (Luke 16:13).

Because of his great possessions and being unwilling to part with them, the rich young ruler “went away sorrowful” after hearing the price he would have to pay for life in the coming age. *It would cost him everything which he possessed.*

“The deceitfulness of riches” — earthly treasure — prevented this man from placing himself in a position

where he could, in the coming age, realize “treasure in heaven”

“The deceitfulness of riches,” which will choke the word of the kingdom and prevent a person from bringing forth fruit, is the reason Jesus said that it was very difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of the heavens (v. 23). In fact, deceitfulness surrounding riches is so great that Jesus likened the matter to a seemingly impossible situation.

He said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (v. 24). Jesus however went on to explain that though something of this nature would be impossible for man, it would not be so with God, for “with God all things are possible” (vv. 25, 26).

Christ’s exact words to the rich young ruler concerning the disposition of his material wealth cannot be viewed as incumbent upon Christians today, for reasons stated elsewhere in Scripture. Christians with material wealth under the proclamation of the gospel of the glory of Christ, during the present dispensation, *are not commanded* to go and sell all that they have and give to the poor. Instead, *they are commanded* to do good with their riches.

Thus, in this respect, the overall teaching and principles in the account of the rich young ruler remain *exactly the same* for Christians today. Christians are to be “ready to distribute” and “willing to communicate” should any person have need. And conducting their lives after this fashion, as they follow Christ and keep His commandments, they lay up for themselves “treasures in heaven” (*cf.* Matt. 6:19-21). Such conduct results in storing up for themselves “a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life [*lit.* ‘...that which is really life’]” (I Tim. 6:17-19).

In the preceding respect, as in the case of the rich young ruler, the price for entrance into the kingdom is still exactly the same — *everything which one has*. Christ and His kingdom must be placed *first* (Matt. 6:33), and a person can no more serve both “God and mammon” today than he could two thousand years ago.

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