

Then Who Can Be Saved?  
Luke 18:18-30  
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Read Luke 18:18-30

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*  
(Hebrews 4:12)

### **Introduction**

I recently read a book called *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel* by Costi Hinn, who is the nephew of the infamous faith healer, Benny Hinn. Costi was involved in his uncle’s ministry and healing crusades for a long time, but eventually questioned it all and broke away from it as an adult to become a pastor of a non-denominational Bible church. Here is one of the encounters he had as he began pastoring his new church:

“I recently met a pastor... who offered me encouragement regarding our upcoming church plant. He pastors a massive church (several thousand) so he took the opportunity to overflow some of his wisdom in our direction. After the brief conversation, I quickly realized that his methods weren’t exactly going to help me grow a church spiritually, but they would certainly help me launch a social club. Here are 4 of his heavy-hitting growth tactics:

1. *Drop all churchy language. The Bible is old and dated. Try to use slang whenever you can.*
2. *Play golf with influencers more than you study. Preaching doesn’t matter, just use sermons from other preachers and focus on hanging out with people. Playing golf with influencers grows the church. Preaching isn’t that important.*
3. *Put sports on all the TVs around the church campus... Men will come to church and hang out for that.*
4. *Make children’s ministry a party. If the kids have fun everyone comes back.*

(Costi continued:) In that list (which is not exaggerated), there are a few ideas that aren’t bad. Golf is a great chance to bond with brothers, we all want children to enjoy church, and some pastors would do well to explain things in simpler language. But that’s not the driving motive behind advice like this. The goal of this advice is church growth. It’s pragmatism; the idea that if it works it must be good. Or in the church world: if it works it must be God. In this sphere of thinking the Bible is a footnote, Jesus is a good luck charm, and the church is a social gathering for suburb folks who dabble in soft moralism.”<sup>1</sup>

Wow, Costi Hinn has come a long way from his days of using people’s ministry donations to fund sports cars and \$1,000 suits. He knows that church is not about the externals and numbers, it’s about bringing the gospel to bear in people’s lives. He knows that it’s not always giving people what they want to hear or what makes them comfortable, but what they need. And few places in Scripture illustrate this better than our text this morning, Luke 18:18-30, where Jesus was approached by a man who wanted to feel good about himself and his spiritual life. Jesus was nearing the end of His public ministry, and for many of us if we were in Jesus’ shoes, it would have been tempting to give this guy what he wanted to hear so that we could add a wealthy “influencer” to our group of followers to ensure that our movement was popular and well-funded. But Jesus did

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<sup>1</sup> Costi Hinn’s article “A Seeker-Driven Church Would Fire Jesus,” found at <https://www.forthegospel.org/a-seeker-driven-church-would-fire-jesus/>

no such thing because He had no desire to just tickle people's itching ears. He reached into the depths of this man's heart and soul and pointed out how far from the kingdom he really was and what it would take for him to please God and find eternal life.

Let's read the first five verses again to see how Jesus challenged this man's moral standards and showed him that it is

### **I. Impossible to Keep the Law (vv. 18-22)**

*18 And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 20 You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" 21 And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." 22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."*

We call this man the rich, young ruler. Luke says he was a ruler, either in government or the synagogue, and extremely wealthy; Matthew gives us the detail that he was young. What an interesting first question: *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus called attention to the way he was addressed: "Only God is good, so if you're calling me good, you're calling me God" is the implication. Jesus had to clarify with this man both of their real identities. This man thought that He and Jesus were very similar – both good men. But the truth was very far from that: one of them was a perfect, holy God and one of them was a wretched sinner in need of grace. Only when the man really understood those identities could he understand his spiritual condition, and Jesus' ability to solve it.

So now that Jesus has claimed equality with God, He also must help this man understand His sinful need. So He gives him a test: How are you doing following the commandments? Verse 21, *"All these I have kept from my youth,"* is this man's honest appraisal of himself. But he is answering what he thinks qualifies as keeping these commandments. Has he really kept them? And, by extension, how well have we really kept them? Let's take just one of them: the sixth commandment, *"You shall not murder."* I'm sure he thought, as many of us do, that I've kept that because I've never taken someone's life with a weapon or some act of violence. Check, case closed, right? Well, not so fast, let's look at what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:21-22: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."* Clearly, Jesus says that murder is much deeper than the actual act; the thoughts and words leading up to it make you just as guilty. The implications of the commandment not to murder are further spelled out in the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q&A of #136 in Modern English [up on the screen](#)):

Q: What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment?

A: "The sixth commandment forbids: taking our own or anyone else's life, except in the pursuit of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; neglecting or withholding the necessary means for the preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, or desire for revenge; all excessive emotions and distracting anxieties; intemperate eating, drinking, working, or playing; speaking in a provocative way, oppressing, quarreling with, hitting, or wounding others, and anything else conducive to the destruction of anyone's life."

Anyone able to check all those boxes? And just in case you think you've done all those things, that's just what is forbidden. How about what's required to keep the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment (LC #135)?

"...we must defend others from violence, patiently endure the afflictions from God's hand, have a quiet mind and a cheerful spirit, practice temperance in the way we eat, drink, take

medications, sleep, work, and play. We should also harbor charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, and kindness. Our speech and behavior should be peaceful, mild, and courteous. We should be tolerant of others, be ready to be reconciled, patiently put up with and forgive injuries against us, and return good for evil. Finally, we should provide aid and comfort to those in distress as well as protect and defend the innocent.”

All of the commandments have deep explanations like this. Clearly, it’s a ridiculous idea to think that we’ve kept any of the commandments to any extent.

That last line of that answer: “we should provide aid and comfort to those in distress as well as protect and defend the innocent” reminds me that there’s a national conversation about abortion right now because of the leaked memo of the Supreme Court saying that it’s time to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. And the pro-abortion/pro-choice side is trying to protect abortion rights by saying it’s women’s rights. And the pro-life side is saying it’s a baby’s life. We don’t have time, and this is not really the text, to debate all of the sides of the issue, but if we are to follow the deep teachings and implications of the 6<sup>th</sup> commandments, then we must do everything we can to save a baby’s life and love the mother and father in a way that makes them want to keep their baby’s life. Since *Roe v. Wade*, there have been an estimated 62 million abortions in America, that is unbelievably tragic. Abortion not only ends the life of a human being, so it falls under the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment prohibition of murder, but it traumatizes and hurts the mother. So with those 62 million abortions, we have tens of millions of women who have to deal with the guilt of having ended the life that was moving inside of them. A writer named Jen Oshman said that,

“Studies show that for women who have an abortion, their suicidality increases by 155 percent. Studies also show that about 80 percent of women would not have chosen abortion if they had felt more supported. So my call to the church, then, is *How can we seek life? How can we come alongside vulnerable women, vulnerable children, vulnerable families, and how can we be people who help them seek life? How can we be a culture that makes abortion not only unthinkable, but unnecessary—just something that’s not even on the agenda because we are a church and a people in a community that comes around the vulnerable population?*”<sup>2</sup>

No matter what happens legislatively, we have an obligation to support life from all angles. We pray to end abortion, but we also support the scared pregnant teen, we support adoption and pregnancy care centers, we do all we can to value other people’s lives.

Back to the rich, young ruler: Do you remember one of the things that I said last week about the Pharisee who was boasting in his prayer about how great he was? I said that his goodness, his exemplary life blinded him to his need to be saved from his alienation from God and his need for a Savior. The ruler is another man who thought the exact same way, that his morally upright life was all he needed to impress God, not realizing that he was just as broken and desperate as someone who flagrantly and unrepentantly breaks all of the commandments constantly.

Verse 22- “*sell all you have and distribute it to the poor.*” When I was younger, I thought that this verse meant that Jesus was giving the man a work to do to achieve salvation. But through many years of thinking about it, I think it’s Jesus challenging his statement that he has kept the commandments. He’s saying, “Oh, you think you’ve kept all the commandments. Let me show you how you don’t even keep the first one: you shall have no other gods before me. Your money is your

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<sup>2</sup> Jen Oshman’s article “The Church’s Role in Making Abortion Unthinkable and Unnecessary,” found at <https://www.crossway.org/articles/>

god.” So He asked the man to sell everything and give the money he made to the poor, then to come follow Him. The man’s response gave Jesus a chance to talk about how it is

## **II. Impossible to be Saved Except By Grace (vv. 23-26)**

*<sup>23</sup> But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. <sup>24</sup> Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> For 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.” <sup>26</sup> Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup> But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”*

Why is it so hard to part with riches, to shake free of their grip on your soul? Because the rich person has built their security around themselves with their wealth and they have built their identity on it. This man essentially has two doors that he has to choose from: Door #1 holds the riches of knowing and following Jesus and gaining eternal life behind it, and Door #2 has his vast financial portfolio and all that it provides for him behind it. And he chooses Door #2, the earthly treasure. We’ve had a number of texts in Luke deal with money, it is such a huge theme for Jesus trying to get us to stop worshiping money and focusing on the right things.

But it’s not just wealth that Jesus challenges us on, it’s any area of idolatry, anything that we hold on to so tight that we cannot let it go as we reach for God. C.S. Lewis wrestled with this idea that he had to give up every area of his life to God’s authority. He said that he came to understand that in Christianity “there was no region even in the uttermost depth of one’s soul... which one could surround with a barbed wire fence and guard with a notice ‘No Admittance.’ And that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, ‘This is my business and mine only.’”<sup>3</sup> God invites Himself into all of our business and into every corner of our heart.

Jesus gives the word picture of the largest beast in the Palestinian area, a camel, trying to squeeze through a tiny opening, a needle’s eye. To the Jewish mind, rich people had every advantage and blessing of God, so Jesus challenging that idea to say that, “actually, wealth is a stumbling block, a barrier to entering the kingdom” was revolutionary. So much so that the people who overheard Him gasped and thought that surely everyone is doomed, no one can get to heaven. And Jesus replied, essentially, “Well, no one deserves heaven and no one can get there on their own, but God can work a miracle.” We can’t achieve salvation, it is a gift. It is never a work of man, always a work of God. Until you understand the idea that “salvation belongs to God” and make that one of the foundations of your theology, you will not understand the Bible and the Gospel very well.

The final verses weigh our lives here versus in eternity:

## **III. Impossible to Sacrifice Without Reward (vv. 28-30)**

*<sup>28</sup> And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” <sup>29</sup> And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup> who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”*

If we remember what Jesus has said about a servant not expecting to be thanked or rewarded for his service, we might be a little dismayed at Peter’s comment. But we should remember that very few of us have given up what the apostles gave up. So give Peter a little grace, and actually let’s thank him for bringing this up; he doesn’t really ask Jesus, “What’s in it for us after all this

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<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, quote by Armand M. Nicholi, *The Question of God* (New York: Free Press, 2022), p. 81.

sacrifice?" But it's implied. And Jesus gives a beautiful answer: God will reward your sacrifice, both in this life and in the life to come.

Have you given up anything for God? Hopefully a redeemed life, a life that has been brought out of the darkness into the light and redeemed by Christ's blood will bear many changes, evidence of a regenerated heart and a renewed mind. Even little things, behaviors that you used to indulge in like cursing or gossiping. Larger things like a dating relationship that didn't honor God or a job where you felt you couldn't behave ethically. Big life sacrifices like the missionary who leaves the town she's lived in her whole life, the CEO who quits his company to start a ministry to the poor, the young man who embraces Jesus despite his Muslim family's disowning him. Every sacrifice will be worth it in the end, Jesus assures us. If the rich young ruler hadn't walked away, he would have found great joy in this life and heavenly rewards in the next.

## Conclusion

Let's get into some practical areas of application: First up, rather than thinking we're off the hook for obeying the Ten Commandments, we all should still try to keep them. They are still a reflection of God's heart and character, and communicate His moral will for us to avoid sin. If you don't know the Commandments by heart in order, then that's your first assignment: memorize them. How can you keep them if you don't even know them? (*List them quickly.*) But know that even as obey them, you can never think that you have actually kept them perfectly. Don't be deceived like the ruler - we break them every day in thought, word, and deed. And to break one is to break all of them - James 2:10 says, "*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*" You will never be justified before God by keeping the law, that's one of the uses of the law: to show us that we can never be perfect and that we need someone else to keep the law for us. Jesus is the only One who can say, "I kept these commandments perfectly my entire life."

Ultimately, the first question the man asked, "*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" was flawed. You can't do anything to inherit eternal life. Think about the nature of inheritance: you get an inheritance because someone decided to leave it to you out of their kindness and love. You didn't "earn" it, you were given it. We inherit eternal life by becoming sons and daughters of God by grace. Other than accepting that free gift, we cannot "do" enough to earn it. Jesus took care of the "doing" part: He kept the law and offered Himself on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

Now, does this text tell us that we need to sell everything we have in order to be saved? We always talk about "the plain meaning of the text," and that seems to be the most direct, obvious way to understand it. But I'm going to say no, because nowhere else does this requirement show up in the Bible. Yes, there are cautions all over the place about loving money over God, but we are never told "by grace you have been saved by faith and by giving away all you own." This command from Jesus to sell everything is not a universal command, it is akin to Him asking this man if he was ready to actually love the true God more than his false gods. We are going to meet a man in the next chapter of Luke who gives away half of what he owns as a result of salvation, and that is firmly where our decisions about money will be made: as we reflect on God's mercy and generosity in our lives, where will we be generous?

Ultimately, though, we have to commend the rich, young ruler for getting to the heart of what is really important. We should want to know how to gain eternal life. We could spend all of our years here on earth winning the game of life by amassing great wealth, owning our dream house, making the best friends, doing work that we love and makes a difference, raising up wonderful kids... All of that is well and good, but if we don't give one thought to our eternal destiny, we have set ourselves

up for billions of years of darkness and pain. We've traded eternity in heaven for (at the most) 100 years of comfort and luxury. I don't know about you, but I think that's a terrible trade-off. The most important question we can ask is "how can I know for sure that I will spend eternity in heaven?" And the answer to that is written all over the Scriptures.

**The first thing** you must believe is what Jesus implied in this passage: that He is God. In John 10:30, He doesn't just imply, He says it outright – *"I and the Father are One."* Colossians 1:15 & 19 say, *"He is the image of the invisible God... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."* Jesus is one-third of the Trinity, the three person God where each person, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are equal in power and might. **The second thing** we must believe is what God requires of us that is also hinted at in this passage: perfectly keeping the law. And our ability to do that is explored in this passage, with the answer being that we absolutely can't. We're totally incapable and so steeped in our own selfishness and depravity, we sin constantly. And it only takes one sin on our account to separate us from a holy God anyways. **The third thing** we must clearly understand is that getting to heaven is not impossible with God, it is a work of grace that God initiates. He changes our hearts so that we will leave our idols to follow Jesus, receiving His sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

The rich young ruler walked away sad that he couldn't let go of his wealth and follow Jesus. He walked away from eternal life because he couldn't let go of the things of this life. Don't make his tragic, eternal mistake. Come to Jesus, knowing that every sacrifice, everything He asks you to do for Him will be worth it. And your eternal reward will make anything you can accumulate on earth pale in comparison.

Benediction

Ephesians 3:20-21 – *"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*