

"Why Callest Thou Me Good?"

"Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights" – James 1:17

IN THE 19th chapter Matthew is recorded the incident of those who brought little children unto Jesus that he might bless them in prayer. While Jesus' disciples rebuked their advance, Jesus said

"Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

This incident was used by Jesus to teach his immediate disciples that they must become as little children in disposition and mind if they are to enter the Kingdom of God.

The main lesson of the incident was not intended only for those followers of Jesus who were his contemporaries, but has been put into the Inspired Record for succeeding generations, out of which God is calling a people for His Name, that they might one and all be taught and instructed to learn this basic lesson towards holiness and righteousness.

It is noteworthy that the next incident recorded in Matt. 19 concerns the rich young ruler who earnestly approached Jesus to enquire —

"Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

Jesus replied—

"Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God."

Knowing the Scripture teaching that God sent His Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3), in which "dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18), we can not only see that Jesus could say, "Why callest thou me good?" but we should also see how fitting a truth it was for him who came to be an offering for sin.

This does not mean that Jesus's character was not good, for he was the manifestation of the only One who is good, that is, God.

The Scriptures do not distinguish a man's character from his fleshly body, but in the final analysis character plus the body equals the man, and the one cannot be separated from the other if the whole man is to be viewed.

Likewise with Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God. His flesh and body nature was a part of him.

We cannot know the true Jesus unless our view includes the vital fact that he also himself took part of our flesh and blood nature (Heb. 2:14). This full view sums up the whole man Christ Jesus, perfect in obedience to his Heavenly Father while being in the likeness of sinful flesh for its condemnation through his sacrificial death.

The young man wanted to know "what good thing" he could do — apparently what one, single thing he could do — that he may have, obtain, or gain eternal life.

Jesus had to clarify the meaning of "good," that there was only One Who is good — God, Who is essentially goodness.

No one can by a series of technical acts of obedience, let alone doing only one good thing, become "good" and be entitled to the eternal life which God possesses. God only is Good, and God only has eternal life. This truth would be publicly declared in Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

But Jesus further answers, saying to the rich young ruler —

"If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."

There is no doubt that this young man was "good" by the current standards of religion and morality of his fellow countrymen. There is no doubt that he was held in the highest respect. Was he not rich? And an ecclesiastical ruler? And a keeper of the Law of Moses?

But Jesus could not be in sympathy with mere surface religion and morality, nor with "goodness" that was only skin deep, so his intention was to draw out from the young man his true, inner self, to make manifest the desires and delights of the enquirer's heart.

In reply to the advice, "Keep the commandments," the young man probably didn't pause very long to say, "Which?" Jesus then enumerated some of the commandments:

"Thou shalt do no murder; Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness; Honor thy father and thy mother; and, **Thou shalt love thy neighbor thyself.**"

The blanket reply from the young man-

"**ALL** these things have I kept from my youth up,"

—does not necessarily mean he did actually live up to these divine commandments in his daily life; his answer merely reveals his own personal judgment in the matter, not the judgment of God.

"What lack I yet?" or, "What more is required that I may obtain eternal life?"

It is at this point Mark says:

"Jesus, be holding him, loved him."

And what kind of love was this? He loved him, in that he did not wish unnecessary hardship on the young man in the command he would now give him. He loved him, in that he in no way wanted to become a stumblingblock to him. Jesus loved the rich young ruler, commanding him —

"If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."

"If thou wilt be perfect." The same word is used in Matt. 5:48, where it is written —

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

As much as the rich young ruler esteemed himself blameless in regard to keeping the commandments and in regard to eternal life, still he was not perfect — was not brought "to the end," or made "complete."

"But when the young man heard that saying, he WENT AWAY sorrowful: for he had great possessions."

He was sorrowful, cast down, sad, grieved, because he was commanded to give up all his possessions — give them up to the poor, who were his neighbors, and concerning whom he had said he kept the command to "Love his neighbor AS HIMSELF."

This was the core of the whole matter in the sight of Jesus, who said, on another occasion —

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

The commandment to the rich young ruler required him to make a complete change in his life, to becoming a child again that he may be of the proper heart and mind to be receptive to the ways of God, which are true love and goodness.

If we would seek to receive eternal life — if we would seek to enter the Kingdom of God — then we must become "little children" that we may be taught to manifest love, mercy and forgiveness.

If we desire to be Jesus' disciples, we must be educated from God's Word concerning these things. We may claim that we are not like this rich young ruler: that we ourselves are REALLY sincere in our efforts to be followers of Christ, and that we are in earnest and full of zeal. But ARE WE really different from the rich young ruler?

Let us get the picture once again, this time from Mark 10:17, where we are told —

"And when Jesus was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

Because the young man was out in the open — "in the way" or "on the road" — and because his religious convictions were not deep-rooted in his heart, we need not conclude that he was being publicly "good" and "humble" merely to be seen of men.

He seems to have had an earnestness and zeal, but not to its perfect end. It was genuine, as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. That is, it was genuine in the eyes of men and society, even in his own eyes also. How could this be? How was it possible for the man not to know the true "intents of his own heart? Because —

"The Heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." (Jeremiah 17:9).

And how could he, being learned in all the commandments of God, possibly think that eternal life could be obtained according to his question put to Jesus? Because —

"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12).

Are we really different for the better than this rich young ruler? Or is our love and zeal for learning righteousness only on the surface-only skin deep -- only a front -- only sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal?

If we are like the rich young man, then just as something hindered his heart from gladly receiving truth in the inward parts, so also something is hindering our inner man in Christ Jesus from growing up to maturity — going on to perfection.

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

"And again I say unto you, 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."

How often are this world's riches the subject of God's Word, and mentioned with warning, and with words exhorting to the utmost in cautious spiritual walk?

Thus in 1 Tim. 6:17, the warning is against putting our trust in uncertain riches; and James declares (5:1) of the wealthy that their riches are corrupted; and thieves break in and steal such riches, or they corrode away, or take wings and fly.

And the rich who had cast much into the temple treasury did not, in Jesus' estimate, cast in as much as the poor widow who gave two mites (Mark 12:43).

These Scripture warnings and estimates are not apparent, and therefore not discernible, by the natural man. But if we are to be followers (disciples) of Christ, we must gradually learn to no longer view things through the eyes of the natural man.

During this incident of the rich young ruler, Jesus' disciples were being taught to forsake the natural point of view and to accept the spiritual point of view, though their

learning, and understanding in these things of the spirit did not come to life until after Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared unto them.

So when Jesus told them —

"Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of God."

— they were exceedingly amazed, not able to understand it or make sense of it. Certainly, they would reason, the rich had every advantage over the Poor to enter the Kingdom.

So to the disciples' way of thinking, this rich young ruler had abundant opportunities and advantages of getting into the Kingdom of God; but if he and the rich, with all their advantages and opportunities, can hardly enter the Kingdom, then who can?

But God does not, and cannot work out man's salvation in accordance with such principles of reasoning as these. Such principles glorify the flesh that Christ came to condemn. The main advantages of riches are leisure and learning and involvement in sundry of man's projects. But all these things are hindrances in the way towards the Kingdom.

Riches, rather than being an almost certain guarantee of entering the Kingdom, are just the opposite — almost a certain hindrance from entering it, for not many rich are called.

To be Jesus' disciples we must take on, however slowly or gradually, this new point of view — viewing things according to the revealed thoughts and ways of God which have been given and are preserved for our learning — that our lives may indeed be dead to the flesh and sin, but alive to God and righteousness. And the true test of our disciple ship is a child-like faith that works by love.

No, we cannot gain or earn eternal life by any single act of doing good. Rather we must learn to live the whole spiritual life now, if we are to receive the gift of God which is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. (N.M. July 1963 Berean)