



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

MISSING THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JUNE 7, 2020

Introduction to Scripture

Some portions of the Bible seem, on first glance, to be teaching a certain lesson or truth, but when we look at them more closely, we find a subtlety or a deeper meaning that can be easily overlooked. I believe that's the case with the story we're about to read from the first of the four biographies of Jesus found in the New Testament, written by one of His close associates named Matthew.

The context: Jesus is heading towards the capital city of Jerusalem (where the climactic events of His life, His crucifixion and resurrection, will occur a few weeks later). He is riding a tidal wave of popularity and public attention. Everyone is talking about Him, everyone wants to know more about Him, and everyone wants a piece of Him—from His enemies looking to catch Him in a gaffe or mistake and blame Him, to potential followers who are hoping to jump onto His bandwagon. The wild scenes at campaign rallies this coming fall (assuming the coronavirus abates and people can gather in large groups) give us something of a feel for the frenzy surrounding Jesus. It is more chaotic and less controlled than White House press conferences—which, though often a verbal free-for-all, are limited by the small number of credentialed reporters allowed in the room. But Jesus' travels and conversations were not so controlled. Let's listen in on one conversation, found in the Gospel of Matthew:

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

¹⁷“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

¹⁸“Which ones?” he inquired.

Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁰“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

²¹Jesus 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.”

²²When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Matthew 19:16-22 (NIV)

The Story of UA Flight 173

It was just after Christmas, December 28, 1978. A United DC-8 jetliner took off from Denver en route to Portland, OR. It was a 10-year-old four-engine plane that had just been overhauled with a thorough maintenance check and was in seemingly peak mechanical condition. Loaded with 181 passengers and accompanying crew, and with 46,000 pounds of fuel in its three tanks (enough, per regulations, for the expected length of the flight plus a full hour of extra fuel as backup), it took off smoothly. The approach to Portland at around 5 PM was in perfect flying conditions: 30 miles visibility, no wind, scattered clouds, and cool temperatures. Captain Malburn McBroom, with 15 years of flying experience, radioed Portland approach. Then a small problem appeared: a warning light indicated a problem with the right landing gear. The pilot decided that rather than landing immediately, he would do a flyover of the airport and let the control tower inspect the landing gear to make sure it was in place. The gear was in fact down, but the pilot was worried that it might not be stable.

The plane did its flyover and then went into a holding pattern, circling high above Portland. The pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer debated what to do, in case the gear didn't hold up and they had to skid on the plane's belly. They went through page after page of their manuals. Flight attendants took time to brief the passengers to be in the brace position. The tower called the plane manufacturer and, after several minutes on hold, reviewed the procedures. At 5:48 the plane began again to approach the airport, but there was another incoming flight and so Captain McBroom yielded and circled some more. A few minutes later they radioed the tower; one more plane was on final approach, and so they yielded their landing slot again. The cockpit crew reviewed one more time their manuals, then discussed with the flight attendants safety procedures on landing.

At 6:02 the captain radioed the tower: "I intend to land in about five minutes. Please have the emergency equipment ready on the tarmac." At 6:06 the first flight attendant radioed the captain that the passengers were ready. He radioed the tower again, "Okay, we'll land in about five minutes." All of this time, now some 70 minutes after their scheduled landing, the captain had been consumed with all of these details. But they were now five minutes beyond their spare fuel capacity. And during this time the pilot never thought to check the fuel gauges.

As the plane lined up for the runway, the co-pilot sounded the alarm: "We just lost engine four." The pilot radioed the tower for permission to land immediately. At 6:11 engine two quit. The captain issued the call "Mayday. We're not going to make the runway." The other two engines died. At 6:15 PM the plane ripped through two houses and skidded 1,500 feet before coming to a stop. Because there was no fuel left, the plane didn't burn, and the houses that were hit happened to be empty. But 8 passengers, a flight attendant and the flight engineer were killed, and 24 were seriously injured. The fatal mistake of the pilot and crew was such a simple one: they forgot to monitor their fuel supply. They were so distracted by other issues that they neglected the most important thing that would have enabled them to land safely at the airport.

What a warning, to people in every walk of life: Be careful you don't neglect the most important thing! And that is the real meaning of our text from Matthew 19, Jesus' conversation with a rich man. Here was a guy who had done a lot of things right but had neglected the one thing that was most critical.

A Revealing Question

Let's inject ourselves more closely into this story. An unnamed man, who, we assume, had never met Jesus before, and with no proper introduction or prelude, blurts out a question to Jesus like a pool reporter at a White House press conference. The question is significant: "What **good thing** must I do to get eternal life?" Unlike the questions frequently asked of Jesus by the Pharisees and others of His enemies, which were intended to be "gotchas" to trap him, this question is a bit different. The man's motive may have been a genuine quest to find the right way to God; or it may have been an attempt to justify himself and get public approval of his religious standing. Either way, the actual wording of the question reveals a fundamental mistake.

The questioner clearly believes that being accepted by God (which both Old and New Testaments describe as "eternal life"—with both a present and future component) is a matter of doing proper things. Theologians have labeled it "salvation by works." It is the attempt of mankind to try to earn God's approval by moral living or by religious rituals. It's a blunder that dates back all the way to primitive man, attempting to appease presumed deities to gain fertility or rich harvests, or to pacify the "gods" to be protected from their wrath. The idol worship of pagan societies ancient and modern, and the moral philosophers, are all an expression of mankind's search to save ourselves by performing the right behaviors.

Instead of immediately telling this man, as He did in other incidents found through the Gospels, that his starting premise is all wrong, Jesus engages in an interesting and enlightening dialogue. The man clearly had grown up in the Jewish faith, with the Ten Command-

ments as its cornerstone. If a person wants to try to earn their way into God’s approval and eternal life, the only way to do that, Jesus says, is to perfectly keep the commandments. The man asks, “Which commandments?” Notice those that Jesus enumerates.

The Ten Commandments

As quick review: The Ten Commandments can be divided logically into three sections. Part One (Commandments 1–4) deals directly with a person’s relationship with God.

- 1) You shall have no other gods before me.
- 2) Don’t worship idols.
- 3) Don’t misuse the name of the Lord.
- 4) Honor the Sabbath, God’s day.

Part Two (Commandments 5–9) addresses our actions towards other people:

- 5) Honor your parents.
- 6) Don’t kill.
- 7) Don’t commit adultery.
- 8) Don’t steal.
- 9) Don’t lie.

Part Three (Commandment 10) refers not to an external act but an inner attitude—and cycles back to our relationship with God:

- 10) Don’t covet (in other words, be content with what God provides to you).

With which commandments does Jesus test the man? Only those from Part Two (Commandments 5–9) that deal with actions towards our fellow men, summing up with the overall concept of loving our neighbor. He does not mention Commandments 1–4 or 10. Why would that be? My hunch: This man has focused solely on the outward actions (we could call that the “horizontal” or human dimension of the Ten Commandments) and completely ignored or neglected the “vertical” or God-centered part.

Neglecting the Vertical

Let's take this man at his word, that he sincerely believes he has never broken a single one of those commandments. Candidly, that is highly unlikely. No human being alive has ever perfectly obeyed even Commandments 5–9 (even if they have fooled themselves into thinking they have). But suppose we grant that he is unaware of any time when he has ever failed to love his neighbor perfectly or treat other people immaculately. Even with that spotless record, it is probable to conclude that he has neglected the most important thing: his relationship with God. He has failed to see that real righteousness is not just a matter of doing the right things towards others but begins by having a heart of love and devotion and trust in God alone.

Although Jesus has never met this man, He can see right through him. (In fact, this is one of many accounts in the Gospels where Jesus has a supernatural knowledge about a person and their inner soul—knowing people even better than they know themselves). And so the Lord puts His finger squarely on the problem: this man has, knowingly or unknowingly, made his wealth and possessions his god. Money is what he really worships, and his savings account is what he has put his true faith in. That is why Jesus told him that he should divest himself of his wealth and become a disciple, a follower of the Savior. It was money that had become the barrier to faith. All his “stuff” had distracted him from the most important thing: his relationship with God.

Following Jesus—embracing Him by faith alone—is the one alternative that allows us to give up the fruitless effort to try to earn our way to God and eternal life. Rather than trying to accumulate enough righteousness points—as this man was trying to do—we can accept salvation as a gift we cannot earn and can never lose. In order to do that, we have to give up the fallacy that we can ever hope to be good enough by our own efforts.

A Misconception

Let's clear up the misconception that some people have mistakenly embraced, which says that Jesus is commanding everyone to volun-

tarily impoverish themselves in order to be a Christian. That is decidedly not what He is saying to everyone. The Lord's words are directed explicitly to this man, for the purpose of removing the barrier that is keeping him from faith. It is showing him in an unmistakable way that he is, in the words of the title of this message, **missing the most important thing**. If the man had said, "Okay, I will give it all up to follow you," it is very possible Jesus would have said to him that was no longer necessary. What mattered was the willingness to make his spiritual life the top priority.

There are many examples in the Bible of a person given a specific instruction by the Lord, and we rightly recognize that the command to that person is not a general one everyone is to follow. When God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to them, we know that was for a specific person in a specific time and place—and not all of us are called to be missionaries to Nineveh. When Moses was told to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh to "let my people go," we know that doesn't directly relate to us. And Matthew 19 does not mean that every one of us is to immediately empty our bank accounts and 401(k).

And there are many places in the New Testament where people who have achieved a level of success and affluence in the world are not required by Jesus to give up all they have. Among those in the Gospel accounts who had financial means and were not asked to embrace poverty: Mary Magdalene (whose generosity helped to provide for the financial needs of the disciples during their travels); Lazarus (the brother of Mary and Martha); Joseph of Arimathea (who loaned his garden for a few days, the cemetery equivalent of Airbnb's short-term rental); and Nicodemus. In the New Testament church are many Christian leaders who had financial means, including Barnabas and Lydia and Philemon and others.

Wealth is not automatically a barrier to true faith. But it can be for some, including the man in Matthew 19.

Summary

Whatever stands in the way of trusting Jesus and following Him needs to be removed—this would include not only the prideful delusion that we can earn our way into God’s favor, but also the misplaced trust in money and material things rather than in our gracious Heavenly Father to care for us. Let’s be warned, from the blunder of the United Airlines pilot and from the wealthy man in our text: **Don’t miss the most important thing!** ■

