

**Questioning a Question**

**FIVE**

CHOOSE TO LIVE

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*If you wish to enter into life,  
keep the commandments.*

Matthew 19:17

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*Do this [keep the command-  
ments], and you will live.*

Luke 10:28

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*I came that they may have life,  
and have it abundantly.*

John 10:10b

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## Questioning a Question

One thing very disturbing to me is to ask a question, but instead of an answer, another question is asked. Does that bother you too? Often my response might be, “Let’s resolve my question first before interjecting another.” I am looking for an answer, not a redirection of the conversation. However, Jesus often did that very thing. He did not respond immediately to the rich ruler’s question, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Rather Jesus questioned the ruler, inquiring, “Why do you call Me good?” This question brings front and center the major issues regarding who truly is *good* and how the goodness of God relates to *life*.

### “Goodness” of God

#### Major Issue #5

Rich ruler’s spiritual perception:

God’s goodness

or

Man’s goodness

Throughout His ministry Jesus asked probing questions to solicit thoughtful responses. He asked Nicodemus, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (John 3:10); after washing the feet of the Twelve, He asked, “Do you know what I have done to you?” (John 13:12); and after His crucifixion

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He asked the two disciples from Emmaus, “What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?” (Luke 24:17). In each case those individuals gained a greater understanding of spiritual issues as a result of Jesus’ inquiry. He forced them to focus on the importance and significance of the topic at hand.

Immediately following the rich ruler’s initial inquiry, Jesus went to the heart of the issue. He asked, “Why do you call Me good?” (Luke 18:19). He then added, “No one is good except God alone.” Obviously the point is that only God is perfectly good because that

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is His very nature, a divine attribute. Jesus brought the young man face to face with the logical outcome of his own question—Jesus is God, a truth the ruler apparently did not comprehend.

Some assume that the rich ruler was a believer since he addressed Christ as the “Good Teacher.” Their argument is that the rich ruler would not have acknowledged Christ as good if he had not been a believer. On the other hand, it could be argued that the rich ruler merely recognized Christ as one who taught about the goodness of God. This would explain Christ’s second statement. “No one is good except God alone.” Indeed, if the rich ruler did know Christ was God in whom he must trust for salvation, Jesus’ last statement would have been entirely unnecessary.

Jesus then exposed the rich ruler’s lack of goodness and in fact the condition of every person. The issue is how excellent, how first-rate, how superlative relative to the Law must a person be to merit eternal life (Matt. 19:18-20; Mark 10:19-20; Luke 18:20-21). Keeping the Law, no matter how outstanding one’s performance, will always fall short of perfection, showing his inability to keep the whole Law (Jam. 2:10).

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### Entering into “Life”

#### Major Issue #6

“Life” is:

Eternal life  
in the future

or

Abundant life  
here and now

The usual way “life” is understood in Scripture is in reference to “eternal life” spoken of as everlasting life in John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” As previously discussed, eternal life begins the moment a person trusts Christ as Savior and then intimacy with Christ in fellowship can be a daily experience.

Christ introduces the “life now” concept in the passages under consideration. When the rich young ruler came to Jesus asking, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain *eternal life*?” (Matt. 19:16),<sup>1</sup> Christ moved the conversation to God’s goodness and then to the Law. Jesus responded, “If you wish to enter into *life*, keep the commandments” (v. 17).<sup>2</sup> There was a shift in the dialogue from possessing everlasting life to experiencing life here and now. The former is possessed by a gift through childlike trust; the latter is experienced by obedience to God’s commands. An identical exchange occurred in Luke 10:25 when the lawyer who tested Jesus asked the question, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Here as with the ruler Christ also responded with another question, “What is written in the Law?” (v. 26). The

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lawyer provided the correct summary of the Law—love God and love one’s neighbor (v. 27). As with the rich ruler, Christ then said, “Do this [*keep the commandments*], and you will *live*” (v. 28).<sup>3</sup> If you want to live (enter into life), obey the commandments. This question is asked twice, and the same answer is given both times: “If you want to really live, obey God’s commandments.”

Let’s not forget that the Law was given to a redeemed nation, having just left Egypt with the doorposts marked with blood, indicating their reliance on God. The summary of the Law is encapsulated in the Decalogue, the ten commandments, and is further elaborated in some 613 commandments. However, the overriding essence of the Law was to love God (first four items of the Decalogue) and to love one’s neighbor (last six items). That is the reason Christ confirmed the lawyer’s summation of the Law. Nevertheless the religious leaders of Christ’s day taught that entrance into heaven was obtained by Law-keeping.<sup>4</sup> Quite frankly, the teaching of the religious leaders sounded identical to Christ’s response to “entering into life” for both the rich ruler and the lawyer—life came by Law-keeping.

As just discussed in the previous issue (page 76), keeping the Law never produced perfect righteousness required by God to possess eternal life. No one can keep God’s Law completely and no one can be saved by it. To gain a right perspective of the Law in these texts, one must understand that there are different motives for keeping God’s commandments. Since the Law was given to a redeemed nation, the Law revealed God’s plan for His redeemed people to have fellowship with Him. The Law was never given to enable Israelites to establish a saving relationship with God. “If righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal. 2:21). Rather, the Law was given to sustain fellowship with God in order to experience an enriched life now. “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may *live* if he does them” (Lev. 18:5).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless the Jewish religious leaders perverted the Law to produce legalistic obedience (have-to-obey)

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in order to gain favor with God. Jesus, on the other hand, invoked obedience to the Law as it was originally intended—obedience out of gratitude (want-to-obey) for the salvation God had already accomplished on their behalf.

When the rich ruler was informed that he must keep the commandments to obtain life, he asked for the list, saying, “Which ones?” (Matt. 19:18). So Christ gave him a sampling from the Law (vv. 18-19). The rich ruler said in essence, “All those are checked off, what’s next?” (Matt. 19:20). Then Jesus said, “Go, sell and distribute your possessions.” That is when the ruler’s “face fell” and deep sadness fell over him. The issue for the rich ruler was trust—trust in his possessions rather than trust in Jesus. He had a relationship problem. That was the same problem of the self-righteous Pharisee in the introductory parable (Luke 18:9-14). However, Christ had already told the rich ruler, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Christ was instructing the rich ruler how to experience an enriched life in the present, sharing fellowship with God. That experience of companionship would be based first on a relationship established through faith. If, on the other hand, works are necessary for salvation, the rich ruler got nearer than most. Nevertheless he went away with great sadness since he could not meet the divine standard.

The lawyer in Luke 10 who came to test Jesus illustrates this same principle. He knew the Law. He also provided the correct response in summarizing the Law (love God and love one’s neighbor). He too flinched. This lawyer was a member of the religious elite, who taught a works-based salvation. He now raised a heart-deflecting question to justify himself, “Who [exactly] is my neighbor?”

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(v. 29). Through the parable of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30-35) Christ explained that a neighbor is anyone with whom you come into contact who has a need. In this story Jesus utilized two religious, Law-abiding figures to point out the wrong interpretation of the Law, which in turn brought about the incorrect application of the Law, forming the basis of self-righteousness. He used the example of a Samaritan, despised by the Jews, to drive home the truth of how to love someone in need. Asking the lawyer to indicate the neighbor in the parable (v. 36), which he correctly identified as the one who

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meets another's need, the lawyer was now faced with a choice, just as was the rich ruler, when Christ says, "Go and do the same" (v. 37). No further interaction is indicated. It would seem that Jesus left this cynic as he began—with no intention of finding life—now or in the future.

The issue is whether Jesus redirected the conversation with the lawyer and the rich ruler from eternal life to life here and now. From one perspective, it is assumed that Christ did move the conversation on how to experience life here and now and therefore how to obtain rewards in the future. Since the basis of life was obedience in each conversation and since obedient works have no place regarding initial salvation, this view believes obedience by those who already possess a relationship results in increasing intimacy in fellowship with God—experiencing real life.

On the other hand, one might point out that just because we find ourselves studying a convoluted interaction between two people does not mean we should lose sight of the main point. We find in



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the interaction between the woman at the well and Christ that they discussed a number of topics: Jewish and Samaritan cultural relations, drinking water versus living water, having husbands versus having no husband, and worshiping at locations versus worshiping in truth. A conversation darted from topic to topic, but the main point was initial salvation. Likewise, the conversations between Christ and both the rich ruler and the lawyer took some twists and turns, but Christ explained how both could be saved. Call it “life” or “eternal life”—that was the main point. If so, this approach raises a significant problem. Was Jesus teaching salvation by works? A problem, don’t you agree!

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### *Chapter 5, NOTES*

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1. Italics and emphasis added.
2. Italics and emphasis added.
3. Italics and emphasis added.
4. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 442; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:235; Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2007), 42; and Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 64.
5. Italics and emphasis added. Life in fellowship with God, which is the result of obedience and therefore is earned, is a New Testament principle as well as an Old Testament principle.

#### *Old Testament:*

“They acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, by which if a man observes them he shall live” (Neh. 9:29).

“If he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully — he is righteous and will surely live” (Ezek. 18:9).

“I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live” (Ezek. 20:11).

#### *New Testament:*

Abundant life is earned. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b). Abundant living is addressed in the following examples:

“By your endurance you will gain your lives” (Luke 21:19).

“But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved” (Matt. 24:13).

“Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls [lives]” (Jam. 1:21).

Obedience not only provides an enriched life with resultant rewards in the future kingdom, but also longevity of physical life. Based on

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Proverbs 10:27; 11:19; 13:14, Zane Hodges writes, “The prolongation of one’s days on earth was facilitated by a righteous life. Their premature termination was the all too frequent consequence of sin” (Zane C. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer* [Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011], 97).

