

One Ladder, So Many Walls

ONE

CHOOSE TO LIVE

A ruler questioned Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, ‘DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.’” And he said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.” When Jesus heard this, He said to him, “One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Luke 18:18-23

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Assume you have been allowed on the set of a movie production. Hustled in to see the filming of a short scene, you are told only that the action takes place in the office of the president of a small company with one of his department heads. The director shouts, “Action!” A young woman with obvious pain on her face enters the set and says, “When are you going to return?” The president replies, “I am not coming back!” She pleads, “Can’t I come with you?” He responds, “No.” In tears, the woman exits. The department head then turns with fear in his eyes to look at the president and says, “What is the company going to do without you?” The director shouts, “Cut!” Your time is up and you are hustled off the set.

Oh, the glamour of films—short segments are shot, sorted, spliced, reassembled, and the result is a complete film that flows just the way the director envisioned it. Not seeing the big picture, you ask the attendant escorting you around the studio, “What was going on in that scene? How does it fit into the movie?” The attendant shrugs, having no clue.

Different Lenses, Different Views

What was going on in that scene? The emotional conversation between the president and the young woman—What was that all about? Their interaction obviously prompted the question by the

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department head. Since I have access to the script, I will let you in on the plot. The talk around the office is that the president might be leaving the company. If so, company stock would take a beating in the financial markets. But in fact the president was not leaving the company; rather he was getting a divorce and leaving his family. The young woman was his daughter. You can see that the department head's response was based on misinterpretation of people and events.

This was only an imaginary plot in a fictitious movie. But it illustrates the source of many theological conflicts that exist because of misinterpretations. The account of the rich young ruler

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(Matt. 19:13-30; Mark 10:13-31; Luke 18:15-30) will be used as a case study in which different interpretations lead to various views on the rich young ruler.¹ Most would agree that these passages are difficult to interpret. Nevertheless interpretive problems must be resolved regardless of which theological position is used. In this study, we will *first* address *ten major issues* along with key concerns for each. *Second*, we will present *four separate interpretations*

that consider the major ways of addressing the subject matter, contrasting and comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each. Even though there are parallel accounts in both Matthew and Mark, the Lukan account will be the major focus. [Note: variations in the content of these three texts are not addressed in this work. Refer to hermeneutical resources for specifics.]

What Does It Say?

Let's summarize the progressive development of the rich-

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young-ruler context, as seen from the Gospel of Luke, which begins in chapter 18, verse 9.

Verses	Content
<i>Differences in People</i>	
9-14	Prior to the rich-ruler incident paralleled in Matthew and Mark, Luke penned the parable of the pharisee and tax-gatherer, contrasting two types of people—those who trust in their own merits and those who trust in God. One sought to justify himself, and the other was justified by God.
<i>Similarities in People</i>	
15-17	Christ’s encounter with children addressed simple, childlike faith, which those entering into the kingdom of God must possess.
<i>Rich Young Ruler’s Question</i>	
18-23	The rich (Luke 18:23) young (Matt. 19:20) ruler (Luke 18:18) came to Christ with a question, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 18). The dialogue between Jesus and the young man ended with the rich ruler leaving disheartened. God’s inherent goodness and man’s obedience were discussed. Christ’s terms, which grieved the rich ruler, first involved going, selling, and giving, then coming and following Him.
<i>Disciple’s Question</i>	
24-27	Jesus’ statement regarding the difficulty of the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God prompted a question from the disciples, “Then who can be saved?” Christ replied that God, not man, saves.
<i>Peter’s Question</i>	
28-30	Peter inquired about the benefit of following Christ. Jesus explained both present and future rewards.

From the content there are obvious contextual relationships. The parable on faith in God (vv. 9-14) and the teaching concerning childlike faith (vv. 15-17) relate to the fact that God, not man, saves

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(vv. 26-27). In all three parallel rich-ruler passages (Matt. 19; Mark 10; Luke 18), the instruction on childlike faith (vv. 15-17) introduces the entrance of the rich ruler and his interaction with Christ concerning eternal life (vv. 18-25). In addition, Peter's question about "following" (vv. 28-30) must have been prompted by the "following Me" requirement Christ gave to the rich ruler (vv. 18-25).

The Rich Ruler Has Issues

Many times the teachings of Jesus seem to create tension. At times we think, "Why didn't He say, 'Such and such?'" He had His opportunity and He let it slip away. For example, at Christ's

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trial before the Sanhedrin, He was asked, "Are you the Son of God?" (Luke 22:70). While one translation indicates He replied, "Yes, I am" (NASB), the actual response, according to the Greek text, is better translated "You say that I am" (KJV; NIV). Why did He not simply answer, "Yes, I am the Christ." Then at other times we may think He should say one thing, and yet

He says something entirely different. Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman He encountered at the well is seemingly convoluted (John 4:4-42). The conversation moves from cultural issues (vv. 7-9), to water issues (vv. 9-15), to social issues (vv. 16-18), to worship issues (vv. 19-26). Why did He not keep on target? Obviously the master Teacher knew what He was doing. But at times we are left wondering why Jesus said what He said in certain situations.

Another example of such a tension is found here in the Gospel of Luke. On two separate occasions individuals come to Christ and request, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25; 18:18). His interaction with each one concludes with answers that are not

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only less clear than one would like, but are in fact troublesome to the evangelical mindset.

Biblical interpretation involves five-interpretive lenses (structural, grammatical, definitional, contextual, and historical) that must be aligned and focused to gain a clear understanding of any passage. Since there is only one correct interpretation for each passage, there are ten major issues that must be discussed to bring clarity to the tensions in the rich-young-ruler texts. Whatever your theological framework, the strain within each issue must be resolved in conjunction with every other issue of the passage. The following list identifies these *ten major issues* and the corresponding chapter in this book that addresses each issue.

Major Issue	Chapter Reference
1. Who Was Asking?	What Must I Do? (Chap. 2)
2. What Was Asked?	What Must I Do? (Chap. 2)
3. What Was Expected?	What Is Expected? (Chap. 3)
4. Kingdom Entrance	Entering the Kingdom (Chap. 4)
5. Spiritual Perception	Questioning a Question (Chap. 5)
6. Life	Questioning a Question (Chap. 5)
7. Jesus' Instructions	When All Else Fails (Chap. 6)
8. Treasure in Heaven	Treasure Hunt (Chap. 7)
9. Ability to Save	Treasure Hunt (Chap. 7)
10. What's in It for Me?	What's in It for Me? (Chap. 8)

Following the analysis of these ten issues involving the rich ruler, *four major theological interpretations* emerge. These interpretations, addressed in chapter 10, are as follows:

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Theological Interpretations

1. Believer pursuing rewards, resulting from discipleship
2. Unbeliever pursuing eternal life, requiring commitment
3. Unbeliever pursuing eternal life, requiring only trust
4. Unbeliever pursuing eternal life, redirected to pursue an enriched life

One Ladder, Which Wall?

Like the rich fool, the rich ruler must decide which wall leads to success. Both men were wealthy. The rich fool missed his “real” potential. The rich ruler now has the opportunity to choose. The following chapters examine his situation and his decision.

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Chapter 1, NOTES

1. Appendix A, *Rich-Young-Ruler Texts*, provides the parallel accounts.

