

Treasure Hunt

STEVEN

CHOOSE TO LIVE

Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

Matthew 19:21

And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Matthew 19:23-26

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When we think of treasures, our minds drift away to some remote island, maybe picturing pirates with shovels in hand clutching a smudged map with a big X in the middle to mark the spot. Hidden many years before, the treasure is there for the taking. All that is left to do is dig and discover.

When Jesus mentioned treasure in His instructions to the rich ruler, I wonder where the young man's thoughts drifted. Rich in his own right, he already possessed an amount of wealth. Asked to give away his own treasure to obtain some unseen riches must have perplexed this young man.

“Treasure in Heaven”

Major Issue #8

“Treasure in Heaven”:

Eternal life earned by works (merit-of-life)	Eternal life or proved by works or (proof-of-life)	Rewards earned by works (evidence-of- maturity)
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Jesus promised the rich ruler “treasure in heaven” if he fulfilled the go, sell, and give instructions (Matt. 19:21). This treasure related to one's treasure *in* heaven, not to the treasure *of* heaven.¹ In the context the treasure is not heaven itself; rather heaven is the loca-

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tion of the treasure. In relation to a pirate's treasure, heaven is the island, while the treasure is the chest filled with untold wealth.

Treasure of Heaven

Many understand the treasure in heaven to be *eternal life*. With this view works are either a requirement for gaining eternal life or the proof of possessing eternal life. The former, *merit-of-life*

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argument, is based on the following terms—"come after Me," "deny himself," "give up all his possessions," "take up his cross daily," and "follow Me" (Matt. 16:24-27; Luke 9:25-26; 14:23-26, etc.). Some say these passages point out obvious criteria for saving faith. Supporting this position, one proponent writes, "The man who sells all to obtain treasure pictures the

one who enters the kingdom of heaven."² Support for the latter, *proof-of-life* argument, is typically found in James 2:14-26. James 2 is used to show that works are a proof of saving faith. They say, "No works, no saving faith, no eternal life."³

On the other hand those who regard future rewards, which are based on good works, as being the *treasure in heaven* also use James 2 for support. Their position is that this passage is addressed to believers and is a warning regarding a wasted life. How you respond to and embrace "the implanted word" in James 1:21 does not prove you possess initial faith, but it demonstrates that you are maturing in the Christian life. That is the intention of James when he uses the illustration of Abraham in offering his son as a sacrifice (Jam. 2:21-24). Certainly believers, out of gratitude for what God has done and continues to do (Eph. 2:8), should walk in obedience

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(Eph. 2:10). Abraham's example speaks to believers and their growth toward maturity. James 2 makes no reference to a proof of saving faith; rather the context concerns maturity. Abraham was already a believer (Gen. 15:6). Not only is the proof-of-life idea foreign to James 2, but also the logical conclusion of that interpretation would be that if Abraham had not been willing to offer up his son, he would not have been saved.

Treasure in Heaven

Jesus told the rich ruler to “go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Matt. 19:21). Already possessing considerable treasure, he was faced with a dilemma. Jesus encouraged him to give up riches he could see, touch, and spend for an invisible wealth he could not see, touch, or spend. The conflict within concerned a shift in dependence from what he already had to what was only an unseen promise. To move from depending on one's accumulated wealth to trusting in God alone for eternal life would establish a saving relationship with God. Then *treasure in heaven* would pertain to *rewards* resulting from giving away earthly wealth as a result of a trust transfer (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22).

A proponent of this view writes,

Often overlooked...is the promise the Lord made to the rich young ruler. He promised him *treasure in heaven*...if he sold

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all that he had and gave the proceeds to the poor (Matt 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). Heavenly treasure is a reward, not a metaphor for eternal salvation (cf. Matt 6:19-21).⁴

The bank transfer from the rich ruler’s account to those of the poor was based on a prior trust transfer. The transfer of funds is an outward demonstration of an inward reality, a transfer of trust. Wealth distribution does not establish a relationship with God; rather it is a reflection of a previously established relationship. Thus, the rich ruler would begin the process of “storing up treasures in heaven” rather than “treasures on earth” (Matt. 6:19-20; Luke 12:33-34).⁵

“Ability” of God

Major Issue #9

Ability to save:

God
through faith

or

Man
by works

When the ruler left disappointed, Jesus’ disciples asked, “Then who can be saved?” (Matt. 19:25). Their question stemmed from the stunning remark of Christ, “Truly I say to you [My disciples], it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 23). Jesus said that a camel could go through the eye of a needle easier “than... a rich man [can] enter the kingdom of God” (v. 24). Note the earlier context of entrance into the kingdom in reference to a child (Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Simple childlike trust or dependence on the Savior was the only requirement for salvation (Luke 18:17).

Christ teaches that entrance is particularly difficult for the wealthy. So why was this of concern to the disciples? Why was this an astonishing remark to them? Their amazement was triggered by

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the rabbinical teaching that riches were a sign of God's blessing.⁶ As a result the disciples must have gasped when told that riches do not signify a right relationship with God. So when they asked, "Then who can be saved?" Christ responded, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Entry into the kingdom is impossible, not just difficult and not just improbable, without the work of God to provide eternal life. In this context, "entry into the kingdom is equated with salvation."⁷

Others understand this passage to mean that Jesus did not address initial salvation at all; rather His concern was sanctification with believers "working out their salvation" (Phil. 2:12). Entrance into the kingdom is understood as the result of a believer's obedient works; entering the kingdom is synonymous with inheriting the kingdom as discussed in chapter 4. This view holds that believers who are wealthy struggle to align themselves with God's desires because as Jesus said, "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23). They believe "hard" refers to difficulty,⁸ but not impossibility because "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Since "all things are possible" with God, the believer must rely on God's work within. This line of argument, however, is based on God actually producing good works in and through the believer rather than a believer choosing obedience in his Christian walk. The present author not only addresses Philipians 2:12-13 in the book, *Rethinking Empowerment*, in chapter 13, "Responsibility and Accountability," but also the total concept of empowerment in the Christian life.⁹

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Many agree that initial salvation is impossible without God. Yet at the same time they erroneously state that man's obedience is required for one to secure eternal life. On the other hand, others understand that the only condition for eternal life is simple childlike trust. There is no denial that man is involved; he must believe in Christ for eternal life. However, adding works as a condition for saving faith or for proof of saving faith have no place in the offer of God's free gift of life and entrance into the kingdom.

Abilities and Rewards

Do not miss the point emphasized by Jesus in this context. Giving away one's money saves no one. Only God can save. On the other hand, the spiritual-treasure map presented to the rich ruler involved directions and responsibilities. Rewards bring spiritual treasure, as the result of man's obedience, but rewards should not be confused with God's gift of eternal life. Man's obedience will be rewarded, whereas trusting Christ as Savior pertains to eternal life and entrance into the kingdom.

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Chapter 7, NOTES

1. The Greek preposition εἰν is correctly translated “in.”
2. John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 136.
3. See Ken Neff, “Myth 11: Works Required” in *HoldFast* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2010), 141-52.
4. Robert N. Wilkin, “Christians Who Lose Their Legacy,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 4 (Autumn 1991), 11 (*italics his*).
5. Zane C. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011), 426-28.
6. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1981), 361; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 688; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 66; Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, 48; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Volume 2:9:51-24:53 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1486.
7. Bock, *Luke*, Volume 2:9:51-24:53, 1486.
8. Curtis H. Tucker, *Majestic Destiny* (Redmond, OR: Last Chapter, 2011), 270, 275-76.
9. Ken Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2011), 167-78.

