

**Ending at the Beginning!**

**NINE**

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

---

---

*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus....Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*

Romans 3:21-24, 27-28

---

---

## Ending at the Beginning!

If you have ever run track in the longer distances, the half mile or the mile, you know that you always finish at the starting line. Regulation tracks are made in a one-quarter mile or a 440-yard oval. After twice around for the half mile or four times for the mile, you finish the race where you began.

As we finish our excursion through the texts addressing the lawyer (Luke 10) and the rich young ruler (Luke 18), we have taken some twists and turns and we now make the final corner, heading to the finish line. As we do, let's first revisit the initial question to see if the answer resolves the issue.

### Interpretation Matters

If the rich young ruler had just asked, "What must I do to be saved?"—the exact question the Philippian jailor asked Paul and Silas (Acts 16:30)—then we would feel comfortable with his inquiry. The jailor's question without doubt is a straightforward request. Well, not so fast. The thoughtful interpreter must decide if the question actually concerned initial salvation (saving faith) or present salvation (sanctification). Was the jailor asking how to be saved, that is, delivered from eternal death to eternal life, or was he asking for deliverance from the daily consequences of sin? Since the context seems to imply that the jailor had never believed in Christ for everlasting life, we should conclude that saving faith was his concern.

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

Paul replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (v. 31). Assuming we agree that initial salvation is the issue, how is it received? Once again, the answer does not seem to present much of a problem. Or does it? While faith is biblically understood as

*The thoughtful interpreter must decide if the question actually concerned initial salvation (saving faith) or present salvation (sanctification).*

simple trust in the object of faith, many understand that “believe” involves a complicated meaning of faith, which includes content, assent, and commitment or obedience.<sup>1</sup> This is a complex concept requiring a working-faith and consistency in discipleship in order to be saved.<sup>2</sup>

What seems a straightforward question is followed by a seemingly discernible answer. But differences in interpretation abound, resulting in disagreements within the Christian community. If the jailor’s simple question and Paul’s simple answer are up for debate, no wonder we have had such a problem getting our arms around the interaction between the rich ruler and Jesus. Let’s

return to the scene and try to discern if the young ruler’s question was appropriate and then see if we can determine if Jesus’ answer is sufficient. Both the question and the answer will be considered from the perspective of the rich ruler, Jesus, and then His disciples.

### The Question: Salvation or Discipleship?

Unless a question is properly understood, just any reply will not do. Note the original question asked from the three different perspectives.

## ENDING AT THE BEGINNING!

### *Rich Ruler's Perspective*

As discussed previously, the young ruler runs up to Jesus asking,

*What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?* (Matt. 19:16)

*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* (Mark 10:17)

*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* (Luke 18:18)

and too the lawyer asked,

*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* (Luke 10:25)

Immediately we say, “His request includes ‘doing’ something to gain ‘eternal life,’ but Paul tells us God does it all; ‘it is not by works’ (Eph. 2:8-9).” Case settled; we do nothing to earn salvation! Well, again not so fast. Did not the Philippian jailor ask, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul answered that question with “Believe...and you will be saved.” The identical issues addressed in Philippi occurred in the rich ruler’s inquiry. Is “believing” a work or a persuasion?<sup>3</sup> Are we talking about a complex, working faith that includes obedience in discipleship? Others retort that the ruler’s question has nothing to do about faith and initial salvation; rather the young ruler is a believer wanting to understand rewards that are “inherited” in the kingdom as a result of discipleship.

Clarification comes only if we can discern the spiritual condition of the rich ruler and the lawyer; whether each is a believer or an unbeliever. If an unbeliever, the concern is eternal destiny. On the other hand, if a believer, rewards in the kingdom are at stake. As previously discussed in chapter 2, in the nearly three-dozen times religious leaders are mentioned in Luke’s Gospel they are always portrayed as being in conflict with Jesus and what He taught. The only exception was Joseph of Arimathea who came to bury Christ

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

after His crucifixion. The weight of evidence suggests that both the lawyer and the ruler were unbelievers, particularly since they asked the identical question and the lawyer's intention was to "test" Jesus in order to trap Him. Additionally, both men were influenced by the first-century, rabbinical teaching that one's eternal destiny was assured by keeping the Law.

### *Jesus' Perspective*

Knowing men's hearts and thoughts (Luke 5:22; 6:8; 16:15; 20:23), Christ redirected both men's question in order to force them to focus on the demands set forth in the Law. While the rich ruler

*The first-century,  
rabbinical teaching  
was that one's  
eternal destiny  
was assured by  
keeping the Law.*

was pushed to understand God's exclusive goodness (Matt. 19:17) and to grasp his own limitations in keeping the Law (vv. 18-20), Jesus moves the lawyer straight to obeying the Law, showing his limitations (Luke 10:26-28). Previously we have discussed the issue of keeping the Law. While Law was never the basis for salvation (Rom. 3:21-28), keeping the Law for the Jewish nation was the foundation for fellowship with God (Lev. 18:5). If

these men were Jewish believers, would not Jesus present keeping the Law in the same manner as in Leviticus 18:5, stressing rewards as a result? If so, "inheriting eternal life" in their original questions could correspond with Christ's promise of "inheriting eternal life" regarding rewards for faithful service (see chapter 8, "What's in It for Me?"). On the other hand, if both men were unbelievers, as suggested above, and they came with a flawed theological question, would not Jesus' reply to the original question indicate their error and emphasize that they must put their faith in Him?

## ENDING AT THE BEGINNING!

### *Disciples' Perspective*

Even before the rich ruler enters the scene, the disciples had heard Jesus' parable in which He contrasted the self-righteousness of a Pharisee with a tax collector's humility before God (Luke 18:9-14). Then Jesus scolded the disciples for refusing to allow children to come to Him, saying, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*" (vv. 15-17). Lesson one, righteousness is not found in self-righteous works but by humbly relying on God's mercy, and lesson two, entrance into the kingdom is only by means of childlike trust. Then the young ruler approached with his question, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life" (v. 18). While it would seem from the immediate context that the disciples would understand the ruler's question as Paul did of the unsaved jailor, they too must have been perplexed with Christ's redirection to the Law. But they had heard this same approach not long before when the lawyer asked the identical question (10:25). There Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30-37) to show the lawyer that he was unable to "justify himself" (v. 29) since perfect love for God and for one's neighbor is impossible. Only by throwing oneself on God's mercy could anyone be justified (cf, 18:9-14).<sup>4</sup>

*I am suggesting  
they did not  
connect rewards  
with inherit.*

On the other hand, the disciples may have understood both men to be believers searching for what they must "do" in order to "inherit" rewards in the future kingdom. Some tell us rewards were a major teaching of Jesus. Nevertheless we must consider the fact that His disciples were not any more attentive than you and I would have been if we were in their shoes. Rewards were taught during Jesus' earthly ministry, but so were other important teachings that were often overlooked. For example, Jesus on many occasions taught

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

about “greatness through service”: (1) Matthew 5:19; (2) Matthew 18:1-5 (Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48); (3) Matthew 20:20-28 (Mark 10:34-45); (4) Matthew 23:11 (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:45-47); and (5) Luke 22:24. The final occurrence in Luke 22 took place in the upper room at the Last Supper when “there arose... a dispute among them [His disciples] *as to* which one of them was regarded to be greatest.” I am suggesting they did not connect “rewards” with “inherit,” particularly since “inherit” was used only two additional times in the Gospels outside the lawyer and rich-ruler passages (Matt. 5:5 and 25:34).

### The Answer: Salvation or Discipleship?

An appropriate answer for the original question was forthcoming.

#### *Rich Ruler's Perspective*

Christ's response:

First,

*If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments*  
(Matt. 19:17).

Second,

*Go and sell your possessions and give to the poor,  
and you will have treasure in heaven; and come,  
follow Me* (Matt. 19:21).

The first part of Christ's answer should have led to the understanding that obedience to the Law produces enriched living, but only for those who already possess a relationship with God. This is the principle stated in Leviticus 18:5. However, the young ruler did not humble himself and place faith in Christ. Consequently Jesus forced the issue further with the “go, sell, give; come, follow.” The ruler



## ENDING AT THE BEGINNING!

did not entrust himself to Christ and therefore did not experience life that is enriched or everlasting. He left dejected.

It seems highly doubtful whether the young ruler or the lawyer were believers engaging Jesus in a conversation about rewards. The former was self-righteous, and the latter was a cynic.

### *Jesus' Perspective*

Knowing the heart and thoughts of the young ruler, Jesus moves the conversation first to the Law as a means for believers to have an abundant life. That led the ruler to have to face the fact that the Law is a revealer of sin and that his trust was in his wealth rather than in God. Second, rather than trusting in Jesus and then following Him in discipleship, the young ruler left in sadness and disappointment. He did not find the answer he was hoping for. On the other hand, Jesus seemingly dismissed the lawyer after showing him through the parable of the Good Samaritan that he was unjustified.

*Both men came as unbelievers and their spiritual condition did not change.*

While Jesus did submit a two-directional set of instructions to the rich ruler, the second part concerning discipleship was contingent on the completion of the first set regarding initial salvation. Both men came as unbelievers and their spiritual condition did not change. Jesus' remark that not one can be saved without God's work of regeneration clarifies this issue (Matt. 19:23-26).

### *Disciples' Perspective*

The disciples had been there when Jesus brought both the lawyer and the ruler to the same point in their respective conversa-

## CHOOSE TO LIVE

tions. Jesus tells the rich ruler first to “go, sell, and give” and then “come and follow.” This is, “Give it all away and then come be My disciple.” Remember, His disciples had also experienced a “come-and-follow-Me” moment (Matt. 4:19).

Speaking for the group as the ruler departs, Peter asks, “What then will there be for us?” since “we have left everything and followed You” (19:27). They knew the subject of the conversation had changed to denying oneself, giving up possessions, taking up one’s cross daily. Peter is probably thinking that Jesus asked this very wealthy man to give up everything and come follow Him just as He had asked of them. However, the rich ruler left still possessing everything whereas they remained with Jesus and had nothing. The team needed some encouragement. Jesus repeats His promise that they would rule and reign with Him in the coming kingdom (Matt. 19:28).

### Right Question, Right Answer

The main inquiry directed to Jesus by both the lawyer and the rich ruler dealt with eternal life. In both cases, each man believed that good works and self-justification were part of the equation. Rewards for discipleship was not their question.

Jesus’ response to each was designed to prompt them to reevaluate themselves in light of the Law. Going further with the rich ruler, Jesus continued to press him to reexamine his reliance on wealth. Replying to both men who sought an answer for their self-validation, Christ tells them that salvation and justification come from God alone.

## ENDING AT THE BEGINNING!

### *Chapter 9, NOTES*

---

1. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2010), 43-53.  
“Myth 3: Faith Is a Tricky Word” presents the error of the nature-of-faith concept that is typically held by Reformed theology.
2. *Ibid.*, 153-164.  
“Myth 12: Co-Payments Required” presents the error of discipleship requirements at initial salvation that is typically held within Reformed theology.
3. *Ibid.*, 75-89.  
“Myth 6: Faith Is a Decision” presents the argument that faith is a persuasion. The Philippian jailor was required to “do” no actions. Instead the only requirement was to be persuaded that Jesus alone is the giver of spiritual life. Faith is simply one’s “persuasion of the trustworthiness of Jesus to provide eternal life” (p. 82).
4. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Luke* ([www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com): 2010), 132.

