

Personal Evangelism 101

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Jesus would have failed personal evangelism class in almost every Bible college and seminary I know. Matthew 19:16-22 describes a young man who looked like the hottest evangelistic prospect the Lord had encountered so far. He was ripe. He was eager. There was no way he would get away without receiving eternal life.

But he did. Instead of getting him to make a decision, in a sense Jesus chased him off. He failed to draw the net. He failed to sign the young man up. Should we allow our ideas of evangelism to indict Jesus? I think we need to allow His example to critique contemporary evangelism. Christ's confrontation of this young man gives us much-needed insight into reaching the lost.

Turmoil of the Heart

Though rich and a ruler while still a young man, he was undoubtedly in turmoil. All his religion and wealth had not given him confidence, peace, joy, or settled hope. There was a restlessness in his soul—an absence of assurance in his heart. He was coming on the basis of a deeply felt need. He knew what was missing: eternal life. His motivation in coming to Christ was faultless.

His attitude was right as well. He wasn't haughty or presumptuous; he seemed to feel his need deeply. There are many people who know they don't have eternal life but don't feel any need for it. Not this young man. He was desperate. There's a sense of urgency in his question, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I might have eternal life?" He did not have a prologue; he didn't warm up; he just blurted it out. He even allowed such an outburst in public and risked losing face with all the people who thought he was a spiritual giant already.

A lot of people, in seeking to understand this passage, have taken the young man to task for the question he asked. They say his mistake was in asking "What good thing shall I do?" But he asked a fair question. It wasn't a calculated bid to trap Jesus into condoning self-righteousness. It was a simple, honest question asked by one in search of truth: "What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"

The Issue of Sin

But here's where the story takes an extraordinary turn. Jesus' answer to the young man seems preposterous: "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (v. 17). Strictly speaking, Jesus' answer was correct. If a person kept the law all his life and never violated a single part of it, he would have eternal life. But no one can. Since he had come with the right motive to the right source, asking the right question, why didn't Jesus simply tell him the way of salvation?

Because the young man was missing an important quality. He was utterly lacking a sense of his own sinfulness. His desire for salvation was based on a felt need. He had anxiety and frustration. He wanted joy, love, peace, and hope. But that is an incomplete reason for committing oneself to Christ.

Our Lord didn't offer relief for the rich young ruler's felt need. Instead, he gave an answer devised to confront him with his sin and his need of forgiveness. It was imperative that he perceive his sinfulness. People cannot come to Jesus Christ for salvation merely on the basis of psychological needs, anxieties, lack of peace, a sense of hopelessness, an absence of joy, or a yearning for happiness. Salvation is for people who hate their sin and want to turn away from it. It is for individuals who understand that they have lived in rebellion against a holy God and who want to live for His glory.

Jesus' answer took the focus off the young man's felt need and put it back on God: "There is only One who is good." Then He held him against the divine standard so he would see how far short he fell: "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." But the young man ignored and rejected the point. He was utterly unwilling to confess his own sinfulness.

Evangelism must take the sinner and measure him against the perfect law of God so he can see his deficiency. A gospel that deals only with human needs, feelings, and problems is superficial and powerless to save since it focuses only on the symptoms rather than sin, the real issue. That's why churches are filled with people whose lives are essentially no different after professing faith in Christ. Many of those people, I'm sad to say, are unregenerate and grievously misled.

A Call for Repentance

The rich young ruler asked Jesus which commandments he should keep. The Lord responded by giving him the easy half of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother." Then He adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (vv. 18 19).

Scripture says, "The young man said to Him, 'All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?'" (v. 20). That demonstrates his shallow perception of the law. It's possible that on the surface he did all those things, but God looks for an internal application. There was no way he could honestly say he

had always kept that law. He could not have been telling the truth—he was either lying or totally self-deluded.

And so there was no way the rich young ruler could be saved. Salvation is not for people who simply want to avoid hell and gain heaven instead; it is sinners who recognize how unfit they are for heaven and come to God for forgiveness. If you are not ashamed of your sin, you cannot receive salvation.

At this point, Mark 10:21 says, "And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him." That statement paints a pathetic picture. The young man was sincere. His spiritual quest was genuine. He was an honestly religious person. And Jesus loved him. However, the Lord Jesus does not take sinners on their own terms. As much as He loved the young man, He nevertheless did not grant him eternal life merely because he requested it.

Submission to Christ

Jesus lovingly tried to help the young man see another essential element of salvation: "Jesus said to Him, 'If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me' (v. 21). Challenging him, Jesus was basically saying, "You say you love your neighbor as yourself. OK, give him everything you've got. If you really love him as much as you love yourself, that should be no problem."

Jesus was simply testing whether he was willing to submit himself to Christ. Scripture never records that He demanded anyone else sell everything and give it away. The Lord was exposing the man's true weakness—the sin of covetousness, indulgence, and materialism. He was indifferent to the poor. He loved his possessions. So the Lord challenged that.

Verse 22 says, "When the young man heard this statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property." He wouldn't come to Jesus if it meant giving up his possessions. It's interesting that he went away grieved. He really did want eternal life; he just wasn't willing to pay the price of repenting of sin and submitting to Christ.

The story has a tragic, heartbreaking ending. The rich young ruler came for eternal life, but left without it. He thought he was rich, but walked away from Jesus with nothing. Although salvation is a blessed gift from God, Christ will not give it to a man whose hands are filled with other things. A person who is not willing to turn from his sin, his possessions, his false religion, or his selfishness will find he cannot turn in faith to Christ.

Adapted from *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

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