

# The man who (nearly) had it all

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today's Bible reading comes from Matthew chapter 19 verses 16 to 26 and is found on page 986 in the church Bibles.

That's page 986. Matthew chapter 19 starting at verse 16.

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life? Why do you ask me about what is good? Jesus replied.

There is only one who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments. Which ones? he inquired. Jesus replied, you shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother and love your neighbor as yourself.

[ 1 : 10 ] All these I have kept, the young man said. What do I still lack? Jesus answered, if you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor.

And you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

When his disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, Who then can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said, With man, this is impossible.

But with God, all things are possible. Thank you, Catherine. Hold on to that, page 986, because I'll just tell you the story, really.

[ 2 : 20 ] I called it the man who nearly had it all. You know, you try and think of a title to summarize when you're going to say something. So I've called it the man who nearly had it all. The reason for that is there in verse 16, the first line of the story.

It starts there, because he's a really nice bloke. Often when you read the Gospels, people are passive-aggressive with Jesus. They come sort of saying nice, saying things that sound nice, but they're trying to catch him out.

It's a pretty normal story in the four counts of the life of Jesus. On this occasion, a very nice approach. Look, a man comes up to Jesus and says, Teacher, that's respectful immediately.

And he kind of asks the right religious question. His question, I think, or I think we'd assume it would be, right? What good thing must I do to get eternal life? So he's ticking all the boxes here.

He wants to be good. Fair play. Nice bloke. He wants to be good. He's polite. And, of course, he asks the question about eternal life, which is a good, nice box to tick.

[ 3 : 28 ] Good. Nice bloke. And then he goes further. If you look down the line a bit, or next page actually, isn't it? 22, line 22 or verse 22. He's a young bloke, which to many of you is no big deal, but wait till he get old.

He's young. So that's pretty cool. And he had great wealth too. Look, 22. He's got a few bob. Oh, he's a catch, this lad. He's very, very nice.

He's got a good job. He's got a few bob. And he's ever so personable. And actually, when you look really closely, there's only one thing there in that whole list of the bloke we're going to read about in a minute.

That's absent. He's not Welsh. Pity. He nearly had everything, didn't he? But that's not why. No, that's not why he nearly had it all.

But he isn't Welsh. So you can measure how long is left in the talk. Let me tell you what happens, I think, in this discussion with Jesus and this young bloke.

[ 4 : 34 ] I think Jesus gives him three chances, and I'll walk you through it, through to verse 22. So it's worth keeping your eyes on it. I think Jesus gives him three chances to see that he's asked the wrong question.

But this is what's beautiful in this story. I think it is. Elegant. Not once does Jesus embarrass him or humiliate him. He finds ways to tell the young man that that's the wrong question, and his first premise is a mistake.

So that's the story. So here we go. Page 986, verse 16. A man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?

So clearly the question contains, what have I got to do? I'd like to have a life that's, what, bigger, longer, richer, deeper.

I want a new life, and I want it to last forever. However, as Ines, again, eloquently spoke and said, well, yeah, I'm frightened of death. That's a pretty universal reality for us.

[ 5 : 44 ] So in some shape or form, this man wants to be able to deal with death. He wants a life that's different. And he thinks he's got to do something. And he's a successful guy.

So he comes to cut a deal, really. Let's do a deal. I'd like to do a deal with you. I think it could work for me. Jesus doesn't answer the question.

Here we go. Strike one. Strike one of three. What have I got to do to get eternal life? Why do you ask me about what is good? You can almost see the puzzle in Jesus' eyes, can't you?

The frown. Why do you base your approach to me on being good? Jesus replied, there's only one who is good. Verse 17. So off the bat, he's just saying straightforwardly in a civilized way.

Your premise is that to have a new life and an eternal life, you have to be good. Fine. Why do you ask me what you've got to do to be good?

[ 6 : 47 ] Why do you think you're good enough? I suppose you might say if he was being a bit more abrupt, isn't it? Why are you asking me? Do you think you're good enough? Well, this would have been a shock, I'm thinking, for this boy.

And indeed, I think it would be a shock for many of us. Because you think, well, that is religion, isn't it? Try and be as good as you can. Try and live by the moral law.

Try and live by the right ethic. And by the way, there's nothing wrong with doing that. Again, I won't keep referring to you in this, but it's a super story. I've got children and grandchildren.

You want your children to grow up as proper citizens. Obviously, don't you? You're decent people. That's what you want. So it can't be wrong. And yet, somehow, Jesus undermines that it's enough.

This would have been a Jewish boy, almost certainly. He'd have grown up in a world where there were sacrifices. Animals were sacrificed regularly and ritually in the Jewish culture, in the Old Testament world, because it represented the fact that human beings fail.

[ 7 : 56 ] And if there really is a God, and he really does exist, and he's holy and perfect, and he made us as creatures, if we do not treat him properly, the Bible calls it sin, I, S-I-N in a children's talk, small s, huge I, small n.

I'm the middle of the universe. You're not. Respect to you. No problem. People can do it if they want. No worries. But not for me, because if I've got three score years and ten, I'll run the world.

Thanks. No problem to me. All relative. This boy should know from his growing up years that the Bible says no one's good enough.

That's why there has to be some kind of justice paid on behalf of each human being, which is the sacrificial system. That's strike one. There's two to go. Here's strike two.

Jesus doesn't catch a breath. The boy doesn't say anything. Jesus carries on, and it looks on the surface. Have a look at it, verse 17. It looks on the surface like a contradiction.

[ 9 : 02 ] Jesus says, well, no one's good enough, basically. Why do you think you're good enough? Wrong. Wrong question. What do I do to get it to not enough? Wrong question. But then Jesus says, if you want to enter life, obey the commandments.

Doesn't that sound immediately like a contradiction? Sure, no one's good enough, but if you do want to have a new life, keep the commandments. But you've just told me that no one's good enough. Watch this. It's genius what he does here.

It's genius. Well, it would be. He's the son of God. It's genius. Watch him change perspectives here on the debate. Here's what he says. Keep the commandments. The boy must have gone happy days.

Because he'd have known the Ten Commandments. Every kid would have known the Ten Commandments. They'd have known them inside out. They'd have seen them written down. They'd seen them on doorposts. They'd have heard them at school. Everybody knew the Ten Commandments in this culture.

Now, the first four commandments, if you like, put it crudely, are vertical. You shall have no other gods before me. They're all about me as a human being and God. And putting God in his rightful place.

[ 10 : 03 ] The second six are social, horizontal, let's call it. It's how you treat each other. Watch what Jesus does. He doesn't mention the first four.

He goes to the fifth commandment. Or the first social commandment. Here he goes. Jesus replied. Oh, the boys chuffed. Verse 18.

Which ones? Bring it on. I know those commandments. Let's have them. I can keep those. I'm back in business with you, Jesus. Jesus replied. Don't murder. I'll count them. Don't murder.

Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie. False testimony is a lie. Honor your father and mother. They are indeed five of the six social commandments. But the last clause that Jesus utters, i.e. love your neighbor as yourself, is not the sixth social commandment or the tenth overall commandment, if you like.

It's not. In fact, Jesus leaves out the tenth commandment or the sixth social one. He leaves it out. He doesn't say it.

[ 11 : 07 ] What you read there, love your neighbor as yourself. Now, anyone listening to him would have gone, he's forgotten the tenth commandment. No, he can't have forgotten it. They say he's the greatest teacher anyone's ever seen in history.

How could he have forgotten it? He's not thick. Was he left it out on purpose? Now, the boy's got to be running that through his brain, right? At this point, the tenth commandment is do not covet, which he doesn't tell.

Do not covet. But keeping up with the Joneses and beating them. Got what everyone else has got, but always wins.

Always the best. Always the top dog. Always the winner. Literally, in the commandments, it says, do not covet your neighbor's wife or business or house.

Like, if anyone's got anything better than you, you're going to win. He's a charmer, but Jesus is saying to him, I know your heart.

[12:10] You're a top bloke, but I tell you what, there's a part of you that you'll turn anyone over to get what you want. Come on, tell the truth to me. Admit it to me. So what will the boy say?

Will he say, you've left out, do not covet. Do you know me? Have you sussed me out? Do you know what's happening backstage? Look what he does. 20.

Oh, what a mug. What an absolute mug. All these I've kept, the young man said. What do I still lack? Oh, he shouldn't have done that.

He shouldn't do that. Not if Jesus really is God who became a man, and not if he really did make 200 billion galaxies and throw them into space. Not if he knew you from beginning to end of life.

Not if he knew you from beginning of eternity. You can't, I went to a school in Milton Keynes not very long ago. But nice city. And it was a year 11 assembly. And I was asked to speak to the children.

[13:10] Bit weird, really. Like talking to my grandchildren. But I walked in. It was a big foyer. And it was very big. Not as big as this, but pretty big. And there was a small boy. No one else in the room, but a small boy.

He was standing against the wall, and he was as pale as the wall. It was a Monday, Tuesday morning. I'd never been there before. Nobody was there. All in registration. So I walk in, and I see this little boy, and I think, oh, safeguarding, safeguarding.

Because he looked like he was either going to faint Dobby sick. And so I thought, oh, there's no one there. So I say, are you all right? And he says, no, sir.

I said, well, what's the matter? He said, well, it was a Tuesday. He said, yesterday it was pouring with rain when we all left school. So we all had to get the school buses by coming through this hall.

He said, so there were loads of people in the hall. And when we came through, he said, somebody took that fire extinguisher over there and sprayed everybody with it. I said, never. He said, yeah.

[14:11] I said, that's terrible. He said, I know. I said, did you do it? He said, I don't know. Pity.

Pity. He was shaking. He'd obviously done it, hadn't he? And very dim, really. He must have, you know, got excited. Because obviously there was teachers in there and people had seen him and he caught it off the headmaster anyway.

Did you do it? He tried to bluff the headmaster. You can't bluff. Can you? Weigh it up before you bluff. Well, bluffing Jesus. Dear, dear me.

When I was preparing this, I remembered many years ago growing up in South Wales, sort of industrial South Wales. The rich young ruler made me think about Tom Tite.

Now, I checked in the 945 service and you two, like me, would say someone's tight when they're the last one to the bar. That kind of thing, isn't it? Right?

[ 15 : 12 ] Good? Tight. Yeah. So there's a man on my street called Tom Tite. But of course, until I was eight anyway, I'll tell you what happened. Now, until I was eight, I assumed that was his surname.

Isn't it? Obviously, Mr. Tite. This unraveled one summer holiday when I was kicking a ball against the wall outside my house. My father was at work. My mother was there.

He was kicking the ball. And Tom Sundays walked by. I must have been feeling quite adult. So I say, Morning, Mr. Sundays. Tom Sundays. At which point, five minutes later, I'm hauled in by my mother.

Hauled in. What on earth did you call Tom Sundays Tom Sundays for? Because you and Daddy call him Tom Sundays. Obviously. He's not Tom Sundays.

Stupid boy. He's Tom Evans. I say, What do you call him Tom Sundays for then? Your father will explain when he comes home. Come in. The father comes home from work.

[ 16 : 12 ] I say, Dad, I've had to stay in all day because I called Tom Sundays, Mr. Sundays. Mommy says, He's Tom Evans. Well, I said, Mr. Sundays, what did I do wrong?

He said, You silly boy. He said, Do you think Tom twice is called Tom twice? Mr. Twice? I said, No. Well, yes.

He said, You idiot. Thomas Thomas. Is Tom twice? Tom tight. There were three Toms. Tom tight is Tom Williams.

And then I was really confused. So I said, Dad, hang on now. I said, He's throwing me now. I said, What about Evans above then? Because he must be a Mr. Evans somehow.

But he said, Evans above. Come on, son. I said, What? He said, He's an undertaker. Evans above. But this was the best one. I just remembered these when I was preparing.

[ 17 : 09 ] Because I thought of tight and, you know, greedy. Right? I said, It was a broken house street. I said, Dad, what about Bill Bungalow then? Because they're like semi-detached houses, you know, two stories.

He said, Come on, son. He said, A bit like you now, this one. I said, What do you mean? He said, Bill Bungalow. I said, Well, why? What's his surname? Billy Williams. Well, why Bill Bungalow? He said, Son.

He said, Nothing upstairs. Just like you. No, sorry. That was a whole segue away. That was, but it came back to memory this week.

What's the worst thing to say to Tom Tite? What's the worst thing to say to Tom Tite? Get them in. Isn't it? Get them in, boy.

What's the worst thing to say to somebody who's determined that he's going to get more than you? However pleasant, however decent, he's driven by his successes.

[ 18 : 12 ] And his whole identity rests in his, how he's perceived in public and how successful he is. And there's nothing wrong with success. There's nothing wrong with achievement. I want my kids to do well.

I want my grandchildren to succeed. I want to do well. There's nothing wrong with it. But here's the problem. Once the good thing becomes the God thing, all perspective is lost.

And all our place in the universe is dislocated. And Jesus came to say, you need to understand that there really is a God.

And that your identity in life cannot only depend on your achievements, though there's nothing wrong with achievements. But you have to understand that a relationship with your creator is the most pivotal thing in your life.

So he says to the young man, if you want to know a new life, and if you want a relationship with God that begins now and lasts forever, you must realize that your achievements drive who you are, and you've got to receive something brand new that cannot hinge on your own ability.

[ 19 : 24 ] It can't. It can't. And so he says, strike three to the man. Here's the last strike. What's the worst thing to say to this man? Jesus answered, verse 21, if you want to be perfect, I suspect there's a bit of sarcasm there.

If you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. The Bible says loads about justice, social justice, right and wrong, wealth and poverty.

This particular context is not about that. This is Jesus Christ very generously and very kindly and very sensitively saying to this young man who was a great success in life, look, I'm going to give you one more chance.

You know I'm not saying give it all away, don't you? He might have said, but what I am saying is this. You've got to look up. You've got to get a new context. You can't negotiate with me because people say I'm something to do with God.

You can't negotiate with me like you're negotiating horizontally in life. It's fine horizontally with other people. When you meet me, as the New Testament describes to us in that 1 Corinthians 15 reading captures for us, this is how they understood what Jesus, who he was and what he had done.

[ 20 : 48 ] He was God's son. God had come into the world in his son. He was perfect. He never did a single thing wrong.

He was never the center of the universe, though in fact he was the center of the universe. And he needed to come and die on a cross because men like this, good men, decent men, women like this, decent people, had put themselves at the center of the universe and put him on the edge.

And justice demands that if you put him on the edge, you must stand before him and account for it. So the incredible thing that happens on the cross of Calvary is that the perfect God in Jesus Christ dies in place of all of us because there isn't one of us who hasn't put ourselves in the center with him on the fringe.

And we're under judgment because God is just. But the cross is the one place in history where justice and love meet because when God himself gives his son to die on that cross, justice and love meet.

And the call of Christianity is pretty straightforward. There is a God. I've just described him for you from the Bible's narrative.

[ 22 : 20 ] And he sends his son to die on a cross so that you and I can be free from the penalty of our rebellion and we can have a new start in life and we can live with him forever in joy.

Will the young man take the offer? Verse 22. When the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth.

Of course, it's not the money, is it? It's the self, self-dependency, autonomy, total autonomy, self-reliance, self-achievement.

Here's the last clause of the story. No one can believe what just happened here. And maybe this morning you're saying, well, that is not my take. What you've just said to me is not my take on Christianity.

I've got plenty of time for saying people should try and be better, better people, better civic society and religion can help. But I've got time for that. I'm taking that. I'm not taking what you've told me.

[ 23 : 29 ] Well, never in history has anyone been willing to accept this comfortably. And it leads to quite a battle in the soul because this is the conclusion. They can't believe it, the people with Jesus.

Verse 23, Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, it's hard for a self-sufficient person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a self-sufficient person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Sorry, the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were, look at the words, greatly astonished, great, they couldn't believe it. And they said, listen, if he can't be a Christian, nobody can.

Are you mad? To Jesus, if he's not a Christian, no one is. He's top block. He's a fantastic fellow. Who's got a chance?

And here's the punchline of the interchange. Jesus looked at them and said, with humanity, this is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

[ 24 : 42 ] That's the end of the story. I don't know what it makes you feel because all I've done is tell you, I've given you the words of Jesus.

I've told you the story. I've told you the Bible story. In the emotional side now of hearing the narrative, look, I have to say, I just find myself going, what a relief this is.

What a relief this is. My relationship with the creator of 200 billion galaxies does not hinge on my ability to be perfect.

And logic and emotional logic and emotional intelligence immediately tells every one of us, surely, that none of us could keep that up, right? You'd have to be a sociopath and a psychopath all rolled into one to be able to say, well, I can keep that up.

No worries about me. I'm perfect, me. All the best. Well, if that's a proper diagnosis of the human condition, even when I try to be the best human being, parent, friend, I can be, even if that is the diagnostic of the human condition, then it is impossible to be restored to our relationship with our creator and it is impossible to be forgiven by him and it's impossible to have a life that doesn't end in a judgment before him for our vanity and rebellion, however pleasant it was on the surface.

[ 26 : 09 ] It's impossible. But with God, all things are possible. So for me, it just makes me go, thank you because you love me and I'm an absolute shambles loads of the time.

Don't you feel like that? So much of what I am under the surface is a battle and a struggle to do the right thing. So often, it's so hard to live properly. So many days, it's hard to just get out of a rut where you're just fed up with things and cross with yourself and cross with other people and somebody loves me regardless.

It's impossible that I can do it but it's possible that he can. This is the Christian faith. It's existential. It's intellectually coherent. It's socially valid and valuable and it gives hope because it's true.

It's true to the head and the heart and the hands in everyday life. So that's the story. I'll just close before we sing a couple of songs to end our service together with a prayer.

For many people in this room, you'll say, look, the reason I come to church on a Sunday is that it's my chance to put my phone off and actually try and remember who I am. It's quiet.

[ 27 : 37 ] The kids are out there. If you've got kids, mostly, you're sitting there. You go, I can remember who I am. I've got my computer open. I'm not on it. What a great thing to remember that this is who you are if you've trusted in Christ.

What a privilege. It doesn't depend on you and your ability. It depends all on him. All on him. What a relief. For others, you'll say, well, I'm definitely not a Christian.

Definitely not. Some will say, well, I thought this was Christianity, what the rich young man did. And you think, hmm, it's not. Here's a prayer that you might pray if you think I actually need to square up on this.

I'll read it to you. It's in three clauses. I'll say it out loud. You may want to say it privately to God if it's your choice. I shan't ask. It goes like this. Dear Lord Jesus, three clauses.

I admit that I have been arrogant in my approach towards you. I believe that you died and rose again to forgive me for this. And I confess you as the one who saves me and my Lord and leader today.

[ 28 : 51 ] So let me pray that and leave a pause for you to reflect on it and say it if it's for you as the musicians come to prepare for our last songs. Dear Lord Jesus, I admit that I have been arrogant in my approach towards you.

I believe you died and rose again to forgive me for this. And I confess you as my saviour and my Lord, my leader today.

Amen. Amen.