

And a ruler asked him, "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 kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother.'" And he said, "All these I have observed from my youth." And when Jesus heard it, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when he heard this he became sad, for he was very rich (Luke 18:18-23; cf. Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22).

It has been asserted recently by some that when Jesus commanded this rich young ruler to sell all that he had and to follow him, this was nothing less than the Gospel for this young man. It is argued that Jesus was asking nothing more than what he asked of all his disciples at this time in His ministry. Most tellingly, it is said that Jesus implicitly affirmed this man's own self-evaluation, that he had in fact obeyed the Commandments since his youth. The implication for us then is that the Gospel is to "follow Jesus," defined as joining the Church, worshiping, learning the Word of God, taking the Lord's Supper and tithing. The way for this young ruler to inherit eternal life is to obey Jesus in this specific command. To have faith *is* to obey.

This is admittedly a unique encounter in Christ's ministry, and one should not become too alarmed at differing approaches even within the same theological tradition. However, it is apparent that those who find the gospel in Jesus' command do so not only from sincere interaction with the text, but also from a strong conviction that the traditional Reformed law/gospel distinction is dead-wrong, and that we should therefore look to see a confluence of law and gospel throughout Scripture, including texts such as this.

And so one pastor asserts, "In Luke 18 we have no hint of a faith vs. works dichotomy, or law vs. grace;" and that the Law/Gospel antithesis is "imaginary" because "The Law as God gave it is the Gospel." Another writes that the law/gospel paradigm is a "deeply flawed way of approaching Scripture." Yet another author more moderately calls the distinction "troublesome." One more writes that from a covenantal perspective, "law and gospel are not antithetically opposed," in either the history of redemption (*historia salutis*) or the application of redemption (*ordo salutis*).

So how should we understand the story of the Rich Young Ruler? If we are inclined to collapse the law and gospel into each other then we will likely read it one way, that Jesus was simply telling the man to obey Him and that he would in that way inherit life. If we are convinced, however, of the grace of the law/gospel distinction, then we are open to trying to understand the wisdom of Christ in a more profound way. And so I hope this might serve as a case study of one way that the balanced Reformed approach to the law/gospel distinction helps us interpret the Scriptures.

First, along with all such stories, we must consider the context and the reason why the Gospel writers placed them where they did in their narratives. The largest context of this story is the teaching methods of Jesus Himself. Jesus is unique not only in His role as Savior, but also in His role as Judge. And even though His Judgmental office is largely restrained in His first

coming, He did pass Judgment on unbelieving Israel in such places as the Seven Woes against the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23) and his prophecies against Jerusalem (Matthew 24). One of the ways that Jesus exercised His role as Judge was through teaching methods that caused the blind to see and those that thought they could see to become blind (cf. John 9:39-41). And so Jesus maintained the right to be as clear or as unclear as fit His perfect purposes. He sometimes answered questions with questions or spoke in riddles. Even the apostles had a difficult time understanding Him. "Ah, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure!" they finally exclaim in the Upper Room (John 16:29).

The clearest example of Christ's dual-purpose teaching is, of course, His parables. Why did He teach in parables, the disciples asked. Jesus answered them,

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven (Mark 4:11-12; quoting Isaiah 6:9-10).

Jesus told parables both to clarify for those who had ears to hear; and to obscure for those who heard without such ears. The point in all this is that we should not be at all surprised if Jesus was trying to teach the rich young ruler through a riddle; trying to penetrate through to the man's idolatry by causing him to *think*. After all, if we are insistent that Jesus' words should always be taken straight up at face value, the next question to ask is how many of us still have all of our hands and feet and eyes (cf. Matthew 18:8-9).

Next, we must ask why the synoptic Gospel writers placed this story where they did in their narrative. First, all three place it right after Jesus' blessing of the little children in which he teaches, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Luke 18:17). Right after Jesus says this, the narratives have the rich young ruler approach Christ with his question. If that ruler is to enter the kingdom of God at all he must receive it like a child and not as someone who is self-important (as rich rulers tend to be). Second, both Matthew and Mark place the little children and rich young ruler pericopes after Jesus' hard teachings on marriage, teachings so difficult that in Matthew, the disciples exclaim, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is expedient not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). Marriage is hard work, but it is necessary work, just like Christian discipleship. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer is not going to be one more thing that the young man can purchase and be done with, but something that will cost him the rest of his life, and yet without price.

But Luke does something different that proves interesting. Luke places these two pericopes after Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (or tax-collector). The reason this is interesting in regards to the rich young ruler is that the tax-collector, who is said to go home justified, would not have been understood to be some debauched, down-in-the-gutter, impoverished sinner. Rather, he was undoubtedly understood by Jesus' listeners to represent a man who was traitorous, corrupt and wealthy, as was the common perception by the Jews of all tax-collectors. He would have been seen as a haughty, rich Benedict Arnold. And yet he was the one who went home justified in the parable. Why? Because he "would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'" And then Jesus

says, “for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:13-14).

Now, it is in that context that Luke records the inquiry of the rich young ruler. What if the rich young ruler had come to Jesus in the posture of the tax-collector? Can we imagine Jesus doing anything other than welcoming him in and assuring him of forgiveness? The publican in the parable went home *justified* without a word being said about the subsequent distribution of his wealth. But Jesus immediately detects a different attitude in the rich young ruler than that of either a child or the publican. This is indicated in Christ’s surprising challenge to the man: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” He detected this man’s idolatry and pride, and so instructs him in a way that may break through his hard heart.

Sadly, the rich young ruler serves as a foil to the preceding context of the humble publican and children. And Jesus intends to reveal this to him. So Jesus lists out the fifth through ninth commandments to see how the man might respond. Jesus never says that these must be followed *in order to* inherit eternal life. After all, these are all “second-table” commandments and that would be a simple works-righteousness. If one argues that the man already had faith but needed to add this obedience to his faith *in order to* be finally justified, that also is a works-righteousness, albeit slightly more subtle. Therefore, an argument that Jesus was trying to teach the ruler *sanctification* by faith will not hold, because then there would not be a question of whether he might inherit eternal life or ever “enter the kingdom of God” (cf. Luke 18:17, 24). Rather, Jesus was testing the man to see how he would answer. As we discussed above, Jesus often taught this way.

The young ruler’s answer reveals that he does not have child-like faith or that of a man convinced of his own sinfulness: “All these I have observed from my youth.” Note that the text explicitly does not state whether Jesus agreed with the man’s own self-assessment. It only states that when He heard it, He said to the man, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). Mark adds the fascinating insight that Jesus looked at the man, and “loved him” (Mark 10:21). Rather than this implying that Jesus appreciated the ruler’s self-avowed obedience, this could easily indicate that Jesus intended to correct him, for God’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

So why did Jesus tell the man that he lacked one thing and to sell all that he had? To show him that there is at least one commandment that even he had to admit he did not follow – the second commandment, for he idolized his wealth. And then perhaps he would see that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). And once the ruler realized this, then he might also see that he had not kept the other commandments as well as he had thought, especially in light of what Jesus taught on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48). In this sense, Jesus certainly appears to be using the law in what Calvin called its first use – to convict of sin. And in this case the sin of idolatry was so deep and hidden to its possessor that it could only be revealed by the most radical of demands. Now, it is true that if the young ruler had truly trusted God, then as a result of his faith he would have sincerely attempted to obey the commandments which he cited. But it seems that his righteousness was like that of Paul in Philippians 3:6, a false one. The text leads us to believe that up until this

point, he lacked true faith, for “he went away sorrowful” (Mark 10:22).

And it is perhaps at this point more than any other that the rich young ruler shows his lack of faith. Even in the face of Jesus’ harsh and unparalleled demands, if the man was truly childlike and desirous of eternal life, then he would have at least stayed and argued. Job, for all his complaining, at least talked to God about it. Jacob, for all his wily selfishness, at least wrestled with God until he secured a blessing. And so are we all called Israel, those who wrestle with God (cf. Galatians 6:16). For wrestling, with all its ups and downs, moans and groans, requires one thing: contact. This is the real, vital back-and-forth of authentic, relational faith; the crying out of disturbed souls such as we find in the Psalms, the Prophets and Paul in Romans 7. And so it seems that if the rich young ruler had really been interested in inheriting eternal life, he would have stuck around to wrestle with God, confessing his weakness and love of money, and discovering more and more the depth of his own sin and self-dependence.

But if the ruler had approached Jesus confessing his sin and seeking pardon, desiring to live a life of repentance until glory, then I am convinced that Christ would have welcomed him in, without it costing the man a penny. For the Scripture says,

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in fatness.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live (Isaiah 55:1-3a).

And then, as the man learned the way of Christ and the Cross he would have learned what it meant for the rich to be not haughty, to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous. He would have learned what it meant to set his hope not on uncertain riches, but on God who richly furnishes us with everything we enjoy (I Timothy 6:17-18). But because the young ruler was a man unaware of his own idolatry, Jesus gave Him a radical demand as a “shock treatment,” to show him his pride.

For after all, Jesus Himself tells us what the teaching point is: “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” The disciples show that they understood exactly what Jesus meant because they ask, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answered saying, “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:24-26).

The rich young ruler needed to be taught that it was impossible for him to be saved apart from God. He could not be saved by buying his way in, or by flattering the Good Teacher, or by following the Ten Commandments. The only thing he could do to be saved would be to throw himself on the mercy of God. And the mercy of God requires nothing but a penitent and childlike faith. A life of discipleship and sanctification follows, but none of that can begin until

one first admits that what is impossible with man is possible with God – He will take me through the eye of the needle.

I was once asked if I tried to keep a balance of law and gospel in my ministry. My response is that I do not if what is meant by balance is some sort of see-saw where the one brings the other down – as if it were possible to have too much of God's law or too much of God's gospel so that either one needed the moderation of the other. We should never try to dilute the holiness of God's demands in the Law by a larger dose of gospel, or bring down the wonders of the gospel by a heavier weight upon law. Rather, both law and gospel are soaring absolutes that pinnacle together in Christ. The higher we hold one up, the higher the other will be. A man who has a high view of God's law will have a high view of God's grace. For a great sinner needs a great salvation. Likewise, a man who understands the magnitude of God's grace to him in Christ will understand the magnitude of the gratitude he owes God by his obedience. For he who has been forgiven much loves much.

And so not only will I say that we should have a high view of the law, but the very highest view possible – that God demands nothing less than moral perfection. But then in the next breath I say that God Himself provides that Perfection in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. What God demands in redemption, God Himself supplies. And so at once we find that Christian faith is both inconceivably easy and inconceivably hard. It is easy because all we must do is believe. It is hard because all we must do is believe – and that changes everything.

God demands of us perfection because He loves us. The grace of the law/gospel distinction is that it explains clearly how God demands perfection and how God fulfils those demands Himself, both without and within us. Without us, God the Son perfectly fulfils His Father's demands through His life, death and resurrection. Within us, God the Spirit increasingly subdues and enables us to freely and cheerfully meet the Father's demands ourselves (WCF XIX.7). And when we fail – as we do daily – the law/gospel distinction steadfastly reminds us that we are already accounted perfect in Christ; and that the Day is unstoppably coming when our own obedience will be fully perfected in glory.

And so we should properly ask: am I as the Rich Young Ruler? Am I holding onto any self-reliance, any self-confidence, any self-focus at all which is keeping me from truly receiving the free grace of God's gospel? If so, I must let it go and come to the Cross empty handed, surrendering my will to His. And when we do this, we find that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. As my self-reliance decreases, so Christ in me increases, making me more and more who I was always meant to be, a child of God.

Insofar as we believe that we have obeyed the moral law of God to His standards we are trusting in ourselves and have understood neither the greatness of God's demands nor the greatness of His mercy. We have not understood that God commands of us fallen men the impossible precisely so that He alone might do it on our behalf. As Luther put it so simply and so well, "the promises of God give what the law prescribes so that all things may be God's alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands, he alone fulfills." That is the law/gospel distinction which Jesus taught, Paul clarified, Luther articulated, and which the classic Reformed Confessions also clearly affirm.