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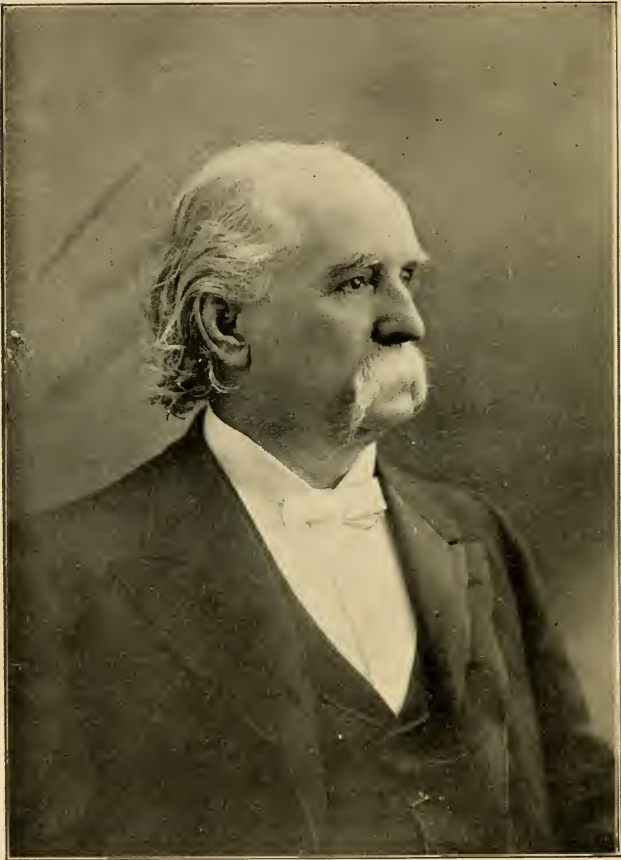
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# THE RULER'S QUESTION.

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“Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?”—MATT. xix. 16.

THE interesting incident, to which the words of the text refer, is given by three of the evangelists. This short discourse with the young Jewish ruler evidently made a very profound impression upon the minds of the disciples. They were made to see the spirituality of the divine law, and the severity of its demands, in a light which they had never contemplated. Their eyes were opened to the fact, that the law required something more than a mere external conformity to its precepts, that its claims embraced the inward affections of the heart, and that no obedience could be perfect which did not originate and rest upon the principle of love. The divine Master takes this occasion to expound the true nature of the law of God, and show the broad sweep of its demands; and he does so in a way that the important truth cannot possibly be misapprehended. The exposition, which he gives, is a startling disclosure both to the young ruler and to the disciples. They see, perhaps for the first time, that all acceptable obedience must be founded in love, and that love to God is the chief and great requirement of the law. The painful discovery is made, that human actions may conform to the letter of the law, and yet be devoid of the very element which gives them merit.

The doctrines taught by Jesus Christ in this interesting interview with the young Jewish ruler are of general application; we are all alike concerned in the principles brought to light in this discourse. “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” is a question which has claims upon us, which we do well to consider. It is of the utmost importance to know what is the true solution of this problem. How is eternal life to be obtained? By what process is the inestimable boon to be secured? Where is it to be found? By what pathway is it to be reached? What course of conduct must be adopted, that will ultimate in its possession? Such inquiries justly deserve the most serious attention. No blessing can be compared to that of eternal life. Before it all else sinks into insignificance. It is the one matter of chief concern which should put every other question in the background. We can place before ourselves no more serious inquiry than that contained in the words of the text: “*Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?*”

Our discourse upon these words will be divided into three parts—

- I. *The facts of this interesting incident.*
- II. *The solution which the Master gives.*
- III. *The result of this interview.*

Notwithstanding the general prejudice against Jesus Christ, we find a number of intelligent Jews came to inquire of him concerning the doctrines he taught and take counsel of him as a wise teacher in spiritual things. We have two cases presented by the different evangelists of particular interest; the one was that of Nicodemus, a distinguished rabbi, who came to Jesus by night at the beginning of his public ministry; the other, that of a wealthy young ruler, who came to Jesus at the close of

his labors in Perea. The two rulers seemed to be alike desirous of being instructed by Jesus Christ. Both wanted more light, and were honestly and earnestly seeking after truth. The two cases gave a favorable opportunity to the blessed Master to bring to light very important doctrines. Nicodemus opened the way to announce the profound doctrine of regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit; that it was a fundamental change wrought upon man's moral nature, and that it was an indispensable requisite to admission to the kingdom of God. The young ruler, in his inquiry as to what he must do to inherit eternal life, gave a most suitable opportunity to exhibit the spirituality of the divine law, that its claims extended to the motive which prompted the act, as well as to the act itself.

The case of this young man, who came running to the Master, and earnestly inquired, "*What good thing he must do to have eternal life,*" is one which deserves our most careful study. Human actions, performed under the most favorable circumstances, are here brought to the severe test of a perfect law; an infallible judge presides, and there can be no possible mistake in the conclusion.

The incident referred to in the text occurred near the close of the public ministry of Jesus Christ as he was passing through Perea and approaching Jerusalem for the last time. This young man who came to the Master to inquire what he must do to inherit eternal life, was of high standing among his people; he was a ruler, a member of the chief council of the nation. He had great wealth, and was distinguished for his intellectual and social culture. "Better than this, he was both amiable and was virtuous; he had made it, from the first, an object of worthy ambition to be just, and to be generous,

and use the advantages of his position to win, in a right way, the favor of his fellow-men. But notwithstanding he was successful in all the aims of his past life, there was a restlessness, a dissatisfaction at heart, a deep consciousness that he had not yet obtained that for which his better nature was longing." He had heard Jesus speak of eternal life, something evidently far higher than anything he had yet attained, and he wondered how it might be secured. To his mind, there appeared but one possible way to secure this great blessing, and that was to do some work of extraordinary merit; and so he comes to Jesus with the pointed inquiry, "*Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?*"

Jesus knew the prevailing thought in this young man's mind, that eternal life was to be merited by some extraordinary work which might be performed; that he regarded it as the reward of some higher virtue which he might yet attain. The very form of the question shows that the young man was fully possessed of this idea, that the title to eternal life could be secured by his own effort. He wanted this great blessing, and if he only knew what would secure it he was, as he supposed, ready and willing to do it. The disciples and the multitude gathered around, were anxiously waiting to hear what answer Jesus would give to the question which the young ruler had so earnestly asked. Perhaps, to their surprise, he said, "*If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments,*" and the young man immediately responded, Which? not conscious that any of the commandments of which he had any knowledge had been neglected. Jesus then said, "*Thou shalt do no murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Honor thy father and thy mother; and*



*thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self.*" The young man listened to the Master as he detailed the various precepts which the law enjoins, and promptly, without the slightest misgiving, he answered, "All these have I observed from my youth. What lack I yet?" He was perfectly honest and sincere in making this reply. He was satisfied that his obedience to these commandments during his past life was everything it should be. To his fellow-men and to himself there would seem to be no defect in his character; he was honest and upright, just and generous to all. To this noble character and virtuous life, he exhibited an amiability of temper and disposition, that drew forth the admiration of all who knew him. Indeed, so attractive did this young ruler appear as he knelt at the feet of Jesus, declaring that he had kept all the commandments from his youth, that it is said, "*Jesus beholding him loved him.*" As a certain writer has appropriately said, "It was something new and refreshing to the Saviour's eye to see such a specimen as this of truthfulness and purity, of all that was morally lovely and of good report among the *rulers* of the Jews. Here was no hypocrite, no fanatic; here was one who had *not* learned to wear the garb of sanctimoniousness as a cover for all kinds of self-indulgence. Here was one who had thus far escaped the contagion of his age and sect, who was really striving to keep himself from all that was wrong, and endeavoring to be towards his fellow-men all that he understood the law of God required." And as Jesus looked upon this noble young ruler of wealth and distinction, humbly kneeling at his feet asking the way of eternal life, "*he loved him.*" Here is the highest tribute that has ever been paid to that moral goodness which is attainable by human effort. None can ever hope to surpass it; few ever equal it. To be so upright, so just, so amiable,



as to win the love of the Saviour, is an attainment few, if any, will venture to claim for themselves. And yet, if it were true that any one could be classed with this young ruler, it will be seen that eternal life is not secured, and the deep cravings of the heart are not satisfied. This very fact ought to have led that young man to suspect that there was something wrong in himself. If his morality was sufficient, why did he come to Jesus at all? He was a rigid moralist, but his soul had never felt the first pulsations of a new life; his heart was not happy with a sense of the divine love, and he knew not the meaning of forgiveness. "Beneath all the pleasing show of outward moralities, there was in that young ruler's breast a lamentable want of any true regard to God, or any recognition of his supreme and paramount claims. His heart, his trust and his treasure were in earthly, not heavenly things. He needed a severe lesson to teach him this fact and to lay bare at once the true state of things in his soul." He had yet to learn what true obedience to the law of God was. He had yet to discover the pure spirituality of the law, and have its claims flashed upon his naked soul, demanding that love to God shall be the prime motive of every act of obedience. It was a critical moment in this young man's history. He was at the feet of the divine Master, who knew what he was, and whose searching eye read the hidden thoughts of his heart. And when he said, I have kept the commandments, and asked the question, "*What lack I yet?*" Jesus said unto him, "*If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor; and come and follow me.*" "*And when he heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*" The one thing lacking was not the mere renunciation of his property and giving it to the poor; it was a supreme

devotedness to God, and clearly indicated duty which he lacked—a willingness to give up anything, yea, everything, if God required it, when the holding of it was inconsistent with fidelity to him. Jesus Christ struck directly at the idol of this young ruler's heart, and he required the instant and absolute dethronement. The demand was refused. He would neither give his property to the poor, nor would he follow Christ. He could not bear the test. He was not what he was supposed to be. This thought brings us to the second part of our discourse—

II. *The solution the Master gives of the case of this young man.*

We have here a most signal exhibition of the fact that amiability of character and a rigid moral life furnish no assurance that the heart is right with God. This young man had the outward appearance of keeping the law; he was honest, he was upright, he respected all the rights of his neighbors; but he did not love God supremely; he had never given his heart with all its wealth of love to God; he had never brought himself to the point to say that the divine will should be his will. Although he knew it was his duty to dispose of his property to the poor and follow Christ, he was not willing to take the step; he chose to do the very opposite, to keep his possessions and go away. Such was the temper and spirit of this young man, whose moral character a little while ago appeared so attractive. It was his boast that he had kept the law from his youth up, and yet his obedience was wanting in the particular element which alone can render any obedience acceptable, and that is supreme love to God. The specific demand of the law is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind and strength." Every precept of the decalogue is

inlaid in this principle; and no obedience can be perfect that is not prompted by this love. Here is the fatal rock on which this young ruler, with all his morality and amiability of character, was wrecked. He had large possessions which he loved more than God, and he would rather keep them than part with them to follow Christ.

It is not to be understood that the Master is here laying down a *universal condition fo Christian discipleship*. No such thing is intended; he puts no premium on poverty, and he puts no penalty on wealth. It is a particular treatment which he adopts for a specific case. If the difficulty in the way of following Christ had been the love of pleasure, or the love of power, or any other object, the test which the case needed would have been framed accordingly. We are not forbidden to love any object that is properly worthy of our love, but we are to allow no object, whatever it may be, to stand in the way of our following Christ. God is justly entitled to the highest place in our affections, and no idol can ever be allowed to usurp that sacred throne. This is the very difficulty that stands in the way of many persons becoming Christians. I may be addressing some one to-day who is stumbling just here. You perhaps have said, "I would like to be a follower of Jesus," "I would like to become a child of God," "I would like to join the church," but there is this difficulty in the way, and I cannot do it.

I beg you to consider most seriously what you are doing. Your case is precisely that of the young man who came to Christ. You are allowing some particular object to come between you and your recognized duty to God. You have something which you are not willing to give up, something which you are not willing to sacrifice, to follow Jesus. So long as this is true you never

can become a Christian. You may be amiable and lovely, you may be honest and upright, you may be generous and benevolent—all this will not give you eternal life. God must be enthroned in your affections, your heart must be given to him before you can be saved. Whenever the sinner comes to the point that he is willing to give up all for Christ, every difficulty disappears at once, and he finds himself, he scarcely knows how, in possession of a new life and a blessed hope.

How different would it have been with the young Jewish ruler, if he had been willing to give up all to follow the Master. He was, perhaps, unable to see how such a step could give *eternal life*, but God required it, and it was his duty to obey. To him eternal life was not possible in any other way. And so it is now we have the unequivocal word of the Master: "*If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.*" On no other terms can salvation be found. And yet there is a particular something which keeps many a sinner from becoming a follower of Christ. Each individual has his particular [hinderance, which prevents him from doing what he knows he ought to do. These difficulties, whatever they may be, will be sure to stand between the sinner and his Saviour just so long as he chooses to let them be there. But can he consent that any difficulty, whatever may be its magnitude, shall keep him back from discharging that highest of all duties, *giving his heart to God*? Let no one be deceived here. The hinderances that keep the sinner back from the Saviour are hinderances only so long as he *chooses to make them such*. All difficulties vanish so soon as the sinner makes up his mind to trust all to the Saviour; and there is no obstacle to this trust but his own will.

The third part of our discourse was to consider—

III. *The result of this interview between the young ruler and Jesus Christ.*

When the question was asked so reverently at the feet of the Master, "*What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life,*" it was natural to suppose the young man would willingly do whatever might be required of him to obtain this blessing. Such, however, was not the case. When "eternal life" was offered to him on terms so different from what he had supposed, he declined it. He would willingly have undertaken to do some extraordinary work, if thereby he could merit, or be entitled to eternal life, but he would have it on no other condition. He wanted the blessing, but he must have it on his own terms and in his own way. The case of this young man is a fair illustration of what is daily taking place under the preaching of the gospel. Persons are asking what they must do to be saved, but they are unwilling to do what that gospel requires; and salvation is not possible in any other way. It is true eternal life was once offered to our race as the reward of perfect obedience, but that opportunity was lost forever when Adam sinned and fell. Obedience to law is not now the source of spiritual life to our sin-cursed race. The law has no life-giving power. Under the "covenant of grace," however, a new order of things is introduced. *Eternal life* is now offered as "the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord." It is no longer a question of doing, it is a question solely of faith, faith in a particular person. Believe on Jesus and thou shalt be saved. It is an astounding procedure, filling heaven and earth with amazement. Still, it is true. Faith, humble, child-like faith, is all that is demanded of the sinner that he may have eternal life. Whatever may

be the mysteries about faith, it is the sinner's own individual act, for which he is held responsible, and he should not delay to put its virtue to the test. He, who believes, is saved, saved immediately, saved for ever. "*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.*"

Morality, amiability of character, and uprightness of conduct, are all very good, they are qualities which challenge our admiration and love, but they are insufficient to deal with the fearful questions of *sin* and *guilt*, and *death*. Faith is the mighty power the sinner needs. It opens to him the vast treasures of a Saviour's love. It wipes out all the disastrous consequences of sin, and fills his new-born soul with joy and rejoicing. It readjusts his relations to the divine law in a harmony that can never be broken, and it transforms his whole nature into the divine image, which he shall wear for ever. This is the precious message of the gospel: "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"