

# Explore the Bible: What is Required?

March 1, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 19 focuses on Matthew 19:16-26.*

In a conversation with a man who had betrayed his marriage vows, he told me the most devastating thing his wife experienced was the breach of trust. Not the sex with another person, *per se*. It was his willingness to break her trust in his faithfulness that was most painful and destructive to her.

Still deeply committed to each other after decades of marriage and with much grueling spiritual and professional help, they found a way of keeping the marriage together. However, years after the event, he acknowledged that, though the marriage survived, it never would be the same.

In marriage, absolute trust in each other is everything. Without it, nothing else of significance is possible. Only in a spirit of unquestioned trust in the faithfulness of each other can spiritual and emotional intimacy thrive.

## **Jesus and the rich man**

When we read today's text, it might help if we interpret what Jesus was saying to the rich man and his disciples in that same spirit. First, it's important to understand the meaning of Jesus' words to the rich man.

We know nothing about how this man heard of Jesus or his teachings. We only can assume the man came to believe Jesus knew something about how to find God and the life God offered. The man obviously was of the Jewish faith tradition.

When he asked Jesus what he had to do to gain eternal life, Jesus referred him back to the faith of his upbringing and the Ten Commandments, with

which the man already was familiar. On the surface, it might appear Jesus was saying there is something a person could “do” in order to gain eternal life.

If that sounds like legalism, that’s because it is. Legalism, in its true sense, is the belief there is something we can do to make ourselves more acceptable to God. If we believe by not breaking God’s rules we believe we can become holy enough for God’s acceptance, we are dismissing the meaning of grace and practicing legalism.

The whole purpose of the Law (the Ten Commandments), as the Apostle Paul discusses at length in the book of Romans, is not so much to give a list of rules to keep as to expose our failure to live up to God’s holiest standards already. The law was given to expose our sinful brokenness. (See Romans chapter 7).

That is what Jesus was trying to point out to the rich man. The problem was, because the man believed he had kept all the commandments, he felt he was good enough for God already. It is interesting that, claiming to believe that, he still felt miserably unsure about his relationship with God.

### **Exposing the rich man’s true faith**

This is when Jesus moved in closer to his true faith. He told the man to go sell all his possessions and follow him. In doing so, Jesus cut to the quick of the man’s true faith in what he owned, not who owned him. In that respect, the man truly had broken the Law by having allowed his wealth to be the repository of his faith. His riches were his false god, which made him a violator of the first commandment.

A false god is anything to which we assign the power to declare our worth to us, other than the God who created us.

As the man walked away, Jesus took advantage of the moment to warn the

disciples of the danger of wealth. Jesus' words are sobering. "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 23).

It's important to note Jesus didn't say it would be "impossible" for a rich person to enter the kingdom, only very hard. The richer we are, the harder it is to come to faith in God and God alone. We all aspire to greater financial security. It's vital for us to remember, however, such aspirations carry an inherent danger to our spiritual well-being.

### **Trust sustains a relationship**

Even in that moment, the disciples discovered their own spiritual desperation. "Then who can be saved?" they asked Jesus (v. 25).

That's when Jesus pointed them to the only thing that creates and sustains a relationship with God—absolute trust. Without trust, there is no relationship. With trust, the most impossible thing to us, our salvation, is still within the power of God to accomplish.

When my youngest son was about 5, I gave him a few dollars for allowance now and then. One time, when I gave him the money, he peeled off the top dollar and offered it back to me.

"What's that for?" I asked him.

"For taking care of me," he said.

I leaned down to his level and said: "Son, you can never repay me for taking care of you. I love you and I always will. I give you what I give you because I love you, and that will never change."

When we believe we can repay God for grace, we become legalists. If we believe there is something we can do to add to what Jesus did to make our salvation possible, we will live miserable lives trying to become good

enough to God.

All Jesus asks of us is that we trust him enough to follow him. Not just “believe” what he said, but actually follow him with all our being. In that spirit of trust, even our salvation is possible.

*Glen Schmucker is a hospice and pediatric hospital chaplain in Fort Worth.*