

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Falling Short: High Achievers”
Matthew 19:16-26

Last week we started this series “Falling Short,” looking at Paul’s words in Romans 3, in particular verse 23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The impetus behind this whole series is a sense that too many of us operate and live and act under the constant uncertainty of whether we’re doing enough or whether we’re good enough. It’s the sort of question that can gnaw at you. It can be about God or religion, asking whether we’re good enough or doing enough from a spiritual sense. Or, it can be about something that isn’t connected to God or religion or anything like that. It can be more about expectations we feel from family, from friends, from work, from school, you name it.

Regardless of where these expectations come from, one thing is certain: we will fall short. No matter how much we try, we will fall short somewhere. Because of the grace of Jesus that should be good news, but as we’ll see today, for some of us at least, it’s really unsettling. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Someone comes up to Jesus with a whopper of a question: “Teacher,” he says, “what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” This someone pops up in three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—and in each one he’s described a little differently, but collectively this person is often known as the “rich, young, ruler.” And what he has to say to Jesus says a lot about who he is, and about how he views the life of faith.

He asks Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Just right there, so many assumptions. Probably the biggest assumption is that “having eternal life” is a matter of *doing* something, as in you do this, and eternal life is yours. Whatever that deed was, no matter how challenging, this rich, young man felt capable of doing it.

Whenever I come across the rich, young man in Matthew, I tend to think of a handful of people I’ve known in high school or college that seemed to just be good at everything. Classes and grades? Top of the class. Sports? All-region, at least. Fine arts? Did I mention they could sing and paint and write bold poetry? Service? Did I mention they served food at a soup kitchen and tutored at the Boys and Girls Club? Then, just to top it all off, and I think this was the worst part about it, they were nice. They were nice, decent people.

I’m guessing each of you can think of a handful of folks as well who kind of fit that bill. Just good at everything, and whatever they set their effort and energy toward, they would tend to succeed.

That’s who I think of whenever I come to the rich, young man in Matthew, someone just immensely capable and successful and able to do anything once their mind is set to it.

And this capable, successful, wealthy young man apparently has a new goal in mind: having eternal life.

Important to note here that “having eternal life” is not exactly the same as “going to heaven when you die,” or at least that’s probably not what the young man meant. In a Jewish context as this is here, phrases like “having eternal life” or “entering the kingdom of heaven” weren’t just a matter of going to heaven or hell when you died. It was bigger than that. It was about entering into the coming age of God’s rule, of that rule being realized on earth as it is in heaven.

Nevertheless, when this man asks about what he needs to do to have eternal life, he’s kind of showing his cards. He’s saying to Jesus, “Yes, I believe that God is at work and that a new age is coming and I want to be a part of it. Now, what do I need to do to make sure I get in?”

Honestly it seems like Jesus tries to play him off. After a somewhat confusing response about who is good and what is good, he then gives the obvious answer in v. 17, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” And that’s sound advice. That’s exactly right. If you want to enter in to life, keep the commandments of God. Following the commandments of God brings about life, a life in right relationship with God and with the world. This is righteousness; this is harmony; these are good things. And it’s not just a matter of following the rules so that you can get rewarded—the very life brought about by abiding in the Lord is the reward. That’s what Jesus means for this young man; and it’s a beautiful statement: if you wish to enter into life, lead a life aligned with God, keep the commandments.

And is this young man satisfied? Is he inspired by this vision of a life in harmony with God’s purposes and coming kingdom? No. He asks, “Which ones?”

Now think about what this young man is saying by asking “Which ones?” He’s not looking to holistically follow the commandments of God, for an entire life to be transformed. He’s looking for a check list, a transactional exchange, in which if he does a, b, and c, he has met the minimum requirements. Keep the commandments. Well which ones?

That mentality took me back to my own mentality when I was studying, of all things, organic chemistry when I was at Georgia. I was pre-med for two and a half years of college, so I slogged through all those chemistry classes. Took me that long to realize I didn’t like studying science. Organic Chemistry, as all of you medical types can attest, was a bit of a weed-out class, and it nearly did the trick for me.

In Organic Chemistry 2, spring semester of sophomore year, we were getting into finals, and I was going into finals with a solid B in the class, and I was satisfied with that.

Now the way final grades were done at Georgia at the time, were strictly by letter grade, meaning your transcript would only have A, B, C, and so on, no A minuses or C pluses yet. But it was the same number scale, roughly 90 and up was an A, 80 and up was a B, etc. So if you had a final numerical average of a 92, you got an A, or if you had a final numerical average of a 97, you still got an A, and in the end result on your final grade and GPA, there was no difference between a 92 and a 97. Both A’s.

What that meant was that if you knew you were sitting on a numerical average in the middle of one of those ranges, you were more or less locked into that grade going into finals. The only way you could change it is if you absolutely aced the final or absolutely tanked it.

That’s where I was in Organic Chemistry 2. Middle of the road B, and I was happy with that. No option to bump it up to a B+ or avoid dropping to a B-. So that meant, in preparing for the final exam, I either needed to absolutely nail it in order to bump the final grade up to an A, or I just needed to not completely tank it to avoid dropping the final grade down to a C. Three guesses which way I went.

That's right. I went for avoiding the tank. I actually went into all the grading formulas and weighted averages to figure out just how much a certain numerical grade on the final would impact the final numerical grade and found out that to keep a B, I just needed to get a 65 or higher on the final. That is the minimum that I had to get in order to get what I wanted out of it. So you know what I did? I studied with that 65 in mind. And you know what happened on test day? I left there thinking, "Not so sure I got it." I ended up with a 67 on that final, kept my B, and it was one of the proudest moments of my life, but that's not the point.

The point is, I saw the whole thing as purely transactional, and I only sought to do the bare minimum to get what I wanted. And *that* is what this young man is asking Jesus about the commandments when he says, "Which ones?" He doesn't just want to know broadly about keeping the commandments. He wants to know precisely what rules he needs to follow, which boxes he needs to check, in order to get what he wants.

Jesus indulges him a little more, listing a few of commandments, but then this guy has the nerve of saying, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" No way that's true, but now Jesus brings out the big guns. This rich, young man was looking for a list of things he had to do in order to fully enter the coming life of God, the kingdom of heaven. Well, here it is. V. 21, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

And at that, the man goes away grieving, the text says, for he had many possessions.

Jesus goes on to describe how hard it would be for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Now remember, "entering the kingdom of heaven" does not exactly mean "going to heaven when you die" but rather, "entering into God's reality," or God's unfolding reign on earth as it is in heaven, so we have to make sure we don't impose something upon Jesus's words that he's not actually saying. But, regardless, what Jesus is saying is that there's something about wealth that can make it incredibly difficult, impossible he actually says later, for someone to fully enter into life as God intended.

Now Jesus singles out wealth here, but I think he's encompassing much more than just a certain bank balance or list of assets. Given the young man's words and actions, it's about much more than just having lots of stuff. This is a man that without too much of a stretch, has accumulated a degree of material success, has found himself in a position of authority and influence, and has become acquainted with success at whatever he sets out to do. And that's one of the big dangers. It's not just about him giving away all his possessions. It's about his letting go of thinking of eternal life or the kingdom of heaven as a purely transactional thing, as in, if he does this and that, then he gets this and that in return. It's how the world goes round, and Jesus completely subverts it.

There's a saying along similar lines—really it's more of a provoking question, and honestly I don't even remember where it came from. But it goes like this. There is nothing you can do to make God love you less, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you more. Both are true, but for every person, one of them is more unsettling than the other. And for this rich, young man, it is definitely the second. There is nothing he could do to make God love him more, no action he could take, no item he could buy, no goal he could achieve to somehow earn his way deeper into God's favor.

For some of us, we're the same way, perhaps not the extreme as the rich, young man, but nevertheless we still view God in transactional terms. Sounds something like, "God, if you do this for me, I promise you I will do that for you." Or, "God, I did all of this and all of that. You owe this and that to me now." We can view any relationship in those same transactional terms,

but especially when it comes to God, we can slip into thinking that if there were some way we might be good enough, or do enough good things, then somehow we can earn or merit some favorable treatment in return, or that because of all our effort we might get an inside track. For those of us in that high-achievement track, acquainted to success through our abilities, resources, and will, that's music to our ears. If only it were so, that we could set up terms, and if we meet our end of the bargain, then God will meet his.

Then imagine our dismay when the answer returns, "There is nothing you can do to make God love you more." Kind of takes away everything about how we were used to operating. Not sure how to move forward now with anything. Not sure what if anything we'd be able to do.

Thanks be to God, for as Jesus said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible," able to take even the hearts of those of us inclined to achieve for ourselves and turn us to live abiding in him and to truly enter into life in the kingdom of heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**