

The Way

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the life of Jesus and his relationship with his Father, highlighting the importance of self-sacrifice and perfection in order to enter into eternal life.

Scripture: Matthew 6:24, Matthew 19:21, Mark 10:21, Luke 14:33, Luke 18:22

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Wealth And Faith"

Description

George MacDonald preaches on the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, emphasizing the importance of seeking perfection through surrendering earthly possessions and following Christ wholeheartedly. The young man, who had kept the commandments, was challenged to let go of his wealth to enter into eternal life, revealing the struggle between worldly attachments and spiritual growth. Despite his initial refusal, there is hope for repentance and transformation as he faces the consequences of his decision and the realization of what he truly values. MacDonald highlights the need for humility, obedience, and a willingness to let go of anything that hinders one's journey towards perfection and oneness with God.

Transcript

'If thou wouldest be perfect.'--St. Matthew xix. 21.

For reasons many and profound, amongst the least because of the fragmentary nature of the records, he who would read them without the candle of the Lord--that is, the light of truth in his inward parts--must not merely fall into a thousand errors--a thing for such a one of less moment--but must fail utterly of perceiving and understanding the life therein struggling to reveal itself--the life, that is, of the Son of Man, the thought, the feeling, the intent of the Lord himself, that by which he lived, that which is himself, that which he poured out for us. Yet the one thing he has to do with is this life of Jesus, his inner nature and being, manifested through his outer life, according to the power of sight in the spiritual eye that looks thereupon.

In contemplating the incident revealing that life of which I would now endeavour to unfold the truth, my readers who do not study the Greek Testament must use the revised version. Had I not known and rejoiced in it long before the revision appeared, I should have owed the revisers endless gratitude, if for nothing more than the genuine reading of St. Matthew's report of the story of the youth who came to our Lord. Whoever does not welcome the change must fail to see its preciousness.

Reading then from the revised version, we find in St. Matthew the commencement of the conversation between Jesus and the young man very different from that given in the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Luke. There is not for that the smallest necessity for rejecting either account; they blend perfectly, and it is to me a joy unspeakable to have both. Put together they give a completed conversation. Here it is as I read it; let my fellow students look to the differing, far from opposing, reports, and see how naturally they combine.

'Good Master,' said the kneeling youth, and is interrupted by the Master:--

'Why callest thou me good?' he returns. 'None is good save one, even God.'

Daring no reply to this, the youth leaves it, and betakes himself to his object in addressing the Lord.

'What good thing shall I do,' he says, 'that I may have eternal life?'

But again the Lord takes hold of the word good:--

'Why askest thou me concerning that which is good?' he rejoins. 'One there is who is good.--But if thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments.'

'Which?'

'Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'

'All these things have I observed: what lack I yet?'

'If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'

Let us regard the story.

As Jesus went out of a house (see St. Mark x. 10 and 17), the young man came running to him, and kneeling down in the way, addressed him as 'Good Master.'

The words with which the Lord interrupts his address reveal the whole attitude of the Lord's being. At that moment, at every and each moment, just as much as when in the garden of Gethsemane, or encountering any of those hours which men call crises of life, his whole thought, his whole delight, was in the thought, in the will, in the being of his Father. The joy of the Lord's life, that which made it life to him, was the Father; of him he was always thinking, to him he was always turning. I suppose most men have some thought of pleasure or satisfaction or strength to which they turn when action pauses, life becomes for a moment still, and the wheel sleeps on its own swiftness: with Jesus it needed no pause of action, no rush of renewed consciousness, to send him home; his thought was ever and always his Father. To its home in the heart of the Father his heart ever turned. That was his treasure-house, the jewel of his mind, the mystery of his gladness, claiming all degrees and shades of delight, from peace and calmest content to ecstasy. His life was hid in God. No vain show could enter at his eyes; every truth and grandeur of life passed before him as it was; neither ambition nor disappointment could distort them to his eternal childlike gaze; he beheld and loved them from the bosom of the Father. It was not for himself he came to the world--not to establish his own power over the doings, his own influence over the hearts of men: he came that they might know the Father who was his joy, his life. The sons of men were his Father's children like himself: that the Father should have them all in his bosom was the one thought of his heart: that should be his doing for his

Father, cost him what it might! He came to do his will, and on the earth was the same he had been from the beginning, the eternal first. He was not interested in himself, but in his Father and his Father's children. He did not care to hear himself called good. It was not of consequence to him. He was there to let men see the goodness of the Father in whom he gloried. For that he entered the weary dream of the world, in which the glory was so dulled and clouded. 'You call me good! You should know my Father!'

For the Lord's greatness consisted in his Father being greater than he: who calls into being is greater than who is called. The Father was always the Father, the Son always the Son; yet the Son is not of himself, but by the Father; he does not live by his own power, like the Father. If there were no Father, there would be no Son. All that is the Lord's is the Father's, and all that is the Father's he has given to the Son. The Lord's goodness is of the Father's goodness; because the Father is good the Son is good. When the word good enters the ears of the Son, his heart lifts it at once to his Father, the Father of all. His words contain no denial of goodness in himself: in his grand self-regard he was not the original of his goodness, neither did he care for his own goodness, except to be good: it was to him a matter of course. But for his Father's goodness, he would spend life, suffering, labour, death, to make that known! His other children must learn to give him his due, and love him as did the primal Son! The Father was all in all to the Son, and the Son no more thought of his own goodness than an honest man thinks of his honesty. When the good man sees goodness, he thinks of his own evil: Jesus had no evil to think of, but neither does he think of his goodness; he delights in his Father's. 'Why callest thou me good? None is good save one, even God.'

Checked thus, the youth turns to the question which, working in his heart, had brought him running, and made him kneel: what good thing shall he do that he may have eternal life? It is unnecessary to inquire precisely what he meant by eternal life. Whatever shape the thing took to him, that shape represented a something he needed and had not got--a something which, it was clear to him, could be gained only in some path of good. But he thought to gain a thing by a doing, when the very thing desired was a being: he would have that as a possession which must possess him.

The Lord cared neither for isolated truth nor for orphaned deed. It was truth in the inward parts, it was the good heart, the mother of good deeds, he cherished. It was the live, active, knowing, breathing good he came to further. He cared for no speculation in morals or religion. It was good men he cared about, not notions of good things, or even good actions, save as the outcome of life, save as the bodies in which the primary live actions of love and will in the soul took shape and came forth. Could he by one word have set at rest all the questionings of philosophy as to the supreme good and the absolute truth, I venture to say that word he would not have uttered. But he would die to make men good and true. His whole heart would respond to the cry of sad publican or despairing pharisee, 'How am I to be good?'

When the Lord says, 'Why askest thou me concerning that which is good?' we must not put emphasis on the me, as if the Lord refused the question, as he had declined the epithet: he was the proper person to ask, only the question was not the right one: the good thing was a small matter; the good Being was all in all. 1 'Why ask me about the good thing? There is one living good, in whom the good thing, and all good, is alive and ever operant. Ask me not about the good thing, but the good person, the good being--the origin of all good'--who, because he is, can make good. He is the one live good, ready with his life to communicate living good, the power of being, and so doing good, for he makes good itself to exist. It is not with this good thing and that good thing we have to do, but with that power whence comes our power even to speak the word good. We have to do with him to whom no one can look without the need of being good waking up in his heart; to think about him is to begin to be good. To do a good thing is to do a good thing; to know God is to be good. It is not to make us do all things right he cares, but to make us hunger and

thirst after a righteousness possessing which we shall never need to think of what is or is not good, but shall refuse the evil and choose the good by a motion of the will which is at once necessity and choice. You see again he refers him immediately as before to his Father.

But I am anxious my reader should not mistake. Observe, the question in the young man's mind is not about the doing or not doing of something he knows to be right; had such been the case, the Lord would have permitted no question at all; the one thing he insists upon is the doing of the thing we know we ought to do. In the instance present, the youth looking out for some unknown good thing to do, he sends him back to the doing of what he knows, and that in answer to his question concerning the way to eternal life.

A man must have something to do in the matter, and may well ask such a question of any teacher! The Lord does not for a moment turn away from it, and only declines the form of it to help the youth to what he really needs. He has, in truth, already more than hinted where the answer lies, namely, in God himself, but that the youth is not yet capable of receiving; he must begin with him farther back: 'If thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments;'--for verily, if the commandments have nothing to do with entering into life, why were they ever given to men? This is his task--he must keep the commandments.

Then the road to eternal life is the keeping of the commandments! Had the Lord not said so, what man of common moral sense would ever dare say otherwise? What else can be the way into life but the doing of what the Lord of life tells the creatures he has made, and whom he would have live for ever, that they must do? It is the beginning of the way. If a man had kept all those commandments, yet would he not therefore have in him the life eternal; nevertheless, without keeping of the commandments there is no entering into life; the keeping of them is the path to the gate of life; it is not life, but it is the way--so much of the way to it. Nay, the keeping of the commandments, consciously or unconsciously, has closest and essential relation to eternal life.

The Lord says nothing about the first table of the law: why does he not tell this youth as he did the lawyer, that to love God is everything?

He had given him a glimpse of the essence of his own life, had pointed the youth to the heart of all--for him to think of afterwards: he was not ready for it yet. He wanted eternal life: to love God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, is to know God, and to know him is eternal life; that is the end of the whole saving matter; it is no human beginning, it is the grand end and eternal beginning of all things; but the youth was not capable of it. To begin with that would be as sensible as to say to one asking how to reach the top of some mountain, 'Just set your foot on that shining snow-clad peak, high there in the blue, and you will at once be where you wish to go.' 'Love God with all your heart, and eternal life is yours:'--it would have been to mock him. Why, he could not yet see or believe that that was eternal life! He was not yet capable of looking upon life even from afar! How many Christians are? How many know that they are not? How many care that they are not? The Lord answers his question directly, tells him what to do--a thing he can do--to enter into life: he must keep the commandments!--and when he asks, 'Which?' specifies only those that have to do with his neighbour, ending with the highest and most difficult of them.

'But no man can perfectly keep a single commandment of the second table any more than of the first.'

Surely not--else why should they have been given? But is there no meaning in the word keep, or observe, except it be qualified by perfectly? Is there no keeping but a perfect keeping?

'None that God cares for.'

There I think you utterly wrong. That no keeping but a perfect one will satisfy God, I hold with all my heart and strength; but that there is none else he cares for, is one of the lies of the enemy. What father is not pleased with the first tottering attempt of his little one to walk? What father would be satisfied with anything but the manly step of the full-grown son?

When the Lord has definitely mentioned the commandments he means, the youth returns at once that he has observed those from his youth up: are we to take his word for it? The Lord at least takes his word for it: he looked on him and loved him. Was the Lord deceived in him? Did he tell an untruth? or did the Master believe he had kept the commandments perfectly? There must be a keeping of the commandments, which, although anything but perfect, is yet acceptable to the heart of him from whom nothing is hid. In that way the youth had kept the commandments. He had for years been putting forth something of his life-energy to keep them. Nor, however he had failed of perfection, had he missed the end for which they were given him to keep. For the immediate end of the commandments never was that men should succeed in obeying them, but that, finding they could not do that which yet must be done, finding the more they tried the more was required of them, they should be driven to the source of life and law--of their life and his law--to seek from him such reinforcement of life as should make the fulfilment of the law as possible, yea, as natural, as necessary. This result had been wrought in the youth. His observance had given him no satisfaction; he was not at rest; but he desired eternal life--of which there was no word in the law: the keeping of the law had served to develop a hunger which no law or its keeping could fill. Must not the imperfection of his keeping of the commandments, even in the lower sense in which he read them, have helped to reveal how far they were beyond any keeping of his, how their implicit demands rose into the infinitude of God's perfection?

Having kept the commandments, the youth needed and was ready for a further lesson: the Lord would not leave him where he was; he had come to seek and to save. He saw him in sore need of perfection--the thing the commonplace Christian thinks he can best do without--the thing the elect hungers after with an eternal hunger. Perfection, the perfection of the Father, is eternal life. 'If thou wouldest be perfect,' said the Lord. What an honour for the youth to be by him supposed desirous of perfection! And what an enormous demand does he, upon the supposition, make of him! To gain the perfection he desired, the one thing lacking was, that he should sell all that he had, give it to the poor, and follow the Lord! Could this be all that lay between him and entering into life? God only knows what the victory of such an obedience might at once have wrought in him! Much, much more would be necessary before perfection was reached, but certainly the next step, to sell and follow, would have been the step into life: had he taken it, in the very act would have been born in him that whose essence and vitality is eternal life, needing but process to develop it into the glorious consciousness of oneness with The Life.

There was nothing like this in the law: was it not hard?--Hard to let earth go, and take heaven instead? for eternal life, to let dead things drop? to turn his back on Mammon, and follow Jesus? lose his rich friends, and be of the Master's household? Let him say it was hard who does not know the Lord, who has never thirsted after righteousness, never longed for the life eternal!

The youth had got on so far, was so pleasing in the eyes of the Master, that he would show him the highest favour he could; he would take him to be with him--to walk with him, and rest with him, and go from him only to do for him what he did for his Father in heaven--to plead with men, be a mediator between God and men. He would set him free at once, a child of the kingdom, an heir of the life eternal.

I do not suppose that the youth was one whom ordinary people would call a lover of money; I do not believe he was covetous, or desired even the large increase of his possessions; I imagine he was just like most good men of property: he valued his possessions--looked on them as a good. I suspect that in the case of another, he would have regarded such possession almost as a merit, a desert; would value a man more who had means, value a man less who had none--like most of my readers. They have not a notion how entirely they will one day have to alter their judgment, or have it altered for them, in this respect: well for them if they alter it for themselves!

From this false way of thinking, and all the folly and unreality that accompany it, the Lord would deliver the young man. As the thing was, he was a slave; for a man is in bondage to what ever he cannot part with that is less than himself. He could have taken his possessions from him by an exercise of his own will, but there would have been little good in that; he wished to do it by the exercise of the young man's will: that would be a victory indeed for both! So would he enter into freedom and life, delivered from the bondage of mammon by the lovely will of the Lord in him, one with his own. By the putting forth of the divine energy in him, he would escape the corruption that is in the world through lust--that is, the desire or pleasure of having.

The young man would not.

Was the Lord then premature in his demand on the youth? Was he not ready for it? Was it meant for a test, and not as an actual word of deliverance? Did he show the child a next step on the stair too high for him to set his foot upon? I do not believe it. He gave him the very next lesson in the divine education for which he was ready. It was possible for him to respond, to give birth, by obedience, to the redeemed and redeeming will, and so be free. It was time the demand should be made upon him. Do you say, 'But he would not respond, he would not obey!?' Then it was time, I answer, that he should refuse, that he should know what manner of spirit he was of, and meet the confusions of soul, the sad searchings of heart that must follow. A time comes to every man when he must obey, or make such refusal--and know it.

Shall I then be supposed to mean that the refusal of the young man was of necessity final? that he was therefore lost? that because he declined to enter into life the door of life was closed against him? Verily, I have not so learned Christ. And that the lesson was not lost, I see in this, that he went away sorrowful. Was such sorrow, in the mind of an earnest youth, likely to grow less or to grow more? Was all he had gone through in the way of obedience to be of no good to him? Could the nature of one who had kept the commandments be so slight that, after having sought and talked with Jesus, held communion with him who is the Life, he would care less about eternal life than before? Many, alas! have looked upon his face, yet have never seen him, and have turned back; some have kept company with him for years, and denied him; but their weakness is not the measure of the patience or the resources of God. Perhaps this youth was never one of the Lord's so long as he was on the earth, but perhaps when he saw that the Master himself cared nothing for the wealth he had told him to cast away, that, instead of ascending the throne of his fathers, he let the people do with him what they would, and left the world the poor man he had lived in it, by its meanest door, perhaps then he became one of those who sold all they had, and came and laid the money at the apostles' feet. In the meantime he had that in his soul which made it heavy: by the gravity of his riches the world held him, and would not let him rise. He counted his weight his strength, and it was his weakness. Moneyless in God's upper air he would have had power indeed. Money is the power of this world--a power for defeat and failure to him who holds it--a weakness to be overcome ere a man can be strong; yet many decent people fancy it a power of the world to come! It is indeed a little power, as food and drink, as bodily strength, as the winds and the waves are powers; but it is no mighty thing for the

redemption of men; yea, to the redemption of those who have it, it is the saddest obstruction. To make this youth capable of eternal life, clearly--and the more clearly that he went away sorrowful--the first thing was to make a poor man of him! He would doubtless have gladly devoted his wealth to the service of the Master, yea, and gone with him, as a rich man, to spend it for him. But part with it to free him for his service--that he could not--yet!

And how now would he go on with his keeping of the commandments? Would he not begin to see more plainly his shortcomings, the larger scope of their requirements? Might he not feel the keeping of them more imperative than ever, yet impossible without something he had not? The commandments can never be kept while there is a strife to keep them: the man is overwhelmed in the weight of their broken pieces. It needs a clean heart to have pure hands, all the power of a live soul to keep the law--a power of life, not of struggle; the strength of love, not the effort of duty.

One day the truth of his conduct must dawn upon him with absolute clearness. Bitter must be the discovery. He had refused the life eternal! had turned his back upon The Life! In deepest humility and shame, yet with the profound consolation of repentance, he would return to the Master and bemoan his unteachableness. There are who, like St. Paul, can say, 'I did wrong, but I did it in ignorance; my heart was not right, and I did not know it.' the remorse of such must be very different from that of one who, brought to the point of being capable of embracing the truth, turned from it and refused to be set free. To him the time will come, God only knows its hour, when he will see the nature of his deed, with the knowledge that he was dimly seeing it so even when he did it: the alternative had been put before him. And all those months, or days, or hours, or moments, he might have been following the Master, hearing the words he spoke, through the windows of his eyes looking into the very gulfs of Godhead!

The sum of the matter in regard to the youth is this:--He had begun early to climb the eternal stair. He had kept the commandments, and by every keeping had climbed. But because he was well to do--a phrase of unconscious irony--he felt well to be--quite, but for that lack of eternal life! His possessions gave him a standing in the world--a position of consequence--of value in his eyes. He knew himself looked up to; he liked to be looked up to; he looked up to himself because of his means, forgetting that means are but tools, and poor tools too. To part with his wealth would be to sink to the level of his inferiors! Why should he not keep it? why not use it in the service of the Master? What wisdom could there be in throwing away such a grand advantage? He could devote it, but he could not cast it from him! He could devote it, but he could not devote himself! He could not make himself naked as a little child and let his Father take him! To him it was not the word of wisdom the 'Good Master' spoke. How could precious money be a hindrance to entering into life! How could a rich man believe he would be of more value without his money? that the casting of it away would make him one of God's Anakim? that the battle of God could be better fought without its impediment? that his work refused as an obstruction the aid of wealth? But the Master had repudiated money that he might do the will of his Father; and the disciple must be as his master. Had he done as the Master told him, he would soon have come to understand. Obedience is the opener of eyes.

There is this danger to every good youth in keeping the commandments, that he will probably think of himself more highly than he ought to think. He may be correct enough as to the facts, and in his deductions, and consequent self-regard, be anything but fair. He may think himself a fine fellow, when he is but an ordinarily reasonable youth, trying to do but the first thing necessary to the name or honour of a man. Doubtless such a youth is exceptional among youths; but the number of fools not yet acknowledging the first condition of manhood nowise alters the fact that he who has begun to recognize duty, and acknowledge the facts of his being, is but a tottering child on the path of life. He is on the path; he is as

wise as at the time he can be; the Father's arms are stretched out to receive him; but he is not therefore a wonderful being; not therefore a model of wisdom; not at all the admirable creature his largely remaining folly would, in his worst moments, that is when he feels best, persuade him to think himself; he is just one of God's poor creatures. What share this besetting sin of the good young man may have had in the miserable failure of this one, we need not inquire; but it may well be that he thought the Master under-valued his work as well as his wealth, and was less than fair to him.

To return to the summing up of the matter:--

The youth, climbing the stair of eternal life, had come to a landing-place where not a step more was visible. On the cloud-swathed platform he stands looking in vain for further ascent. What he thought with himself he wanted, I cannot tell: his idea of eternal life I do not know; I can hardly think it was but the poor idea of living for ever, all that commonplace minds grasp at for eternal life--its mere concomitant shadow, in itself not worth thinking about, not for a moment to be disputed, and taken for granted by all devout Jews: when a man has eternal life, that is, when he is one with God, what should he do but live for ever? without oneness with God, the continuance of existence would be to me the all but unsurpassable curse--the unsurpassable itself being, a God other than the God I see in Jesus; but whatever his idea, it must have held in it, though perhaps only in solution, all such notions as he had concerning God and man and a common righteousness. While thus he stands, then, alone and helpless, behold the form of the Son of Man! It is God himself come to meet the climbing youth, to take him by the hand, and lead him up his own stair, the only stair by which ascent can be made. He shows him the first step of it through the mist. His feet are heavy; they have golden shoes. To go up that stair he must throw aside his shoes. He must walk bare-footed into life eternal. Rather than so, rather than stride free-limbed up the everlasting stair to the bosom of the Father, he will keep his precious shoes! It is better to drag them about on the earth, than part with them for a world where they are useless!

But how miserable his precious things, his golden vessels, his embroidered garments, his stately house, must have seemed when he went back to them from the face of the Lord! Surely it cannot have been long before in shame and misery he cast all from him, even as Judas cast from him the thirty pieces of silver, in the agony of every one who wakes to the fact that he has preferred money to the Master! For, although never can man be saved without being freed from his possessions, it is yet only hard, not impossible, for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/george-macdonald/the-way/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net