

The Man Who (Nearly) Had It All

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- [0:00] I've called this the man who nearly had it all, because he nearly did. But he didn't quite have everything. It's 986 in the pew Bible that you've got there.
- Look at verse 16. He's a class act, this chap. Now, a man came up to Jesus and asked, teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?
- If you look down the story, we find out some facts about him. We're told a few times he's wealthy. Verse 22, 22 and 23 and 24. We're told a few times he's wealthy.
- He's young, verse 22. And he's really polite. Look at him in 16. Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life? So many people approach Jesus quite aggressively in the Gospels, in the four accounts of his life.
- This chap's great. So start adding them up now. He's top man, this boy. Right? He's young, which doesn't, you know, if you're young, doesn't matter. But wait till you're old. It's great being young.
- [1:01] He's young. He's got a few bob. And he's really, really got great emotional intelligence. Now, my girls are taken for, but if they weren't, this boy would have a chance.
- He's a top man. But do you notice there is something missing? Look. Look closely. Just have the words in front of you. Do you see what's missing there?
- He's got everything going for him. But he's not Welsh. Yeah. No, it's not in the text. It's just a throwaway line.
- This story is really straightforward. It's a brilliant story. I hope I can, well, I hope together we can show how straightforward it is and what a powerful punch it packs. This boy asks a question to Jesus and he is a really nice chap.
- And he's obviously a cultural achiever. He's obviously a top, top guy. He's smart and he knows what he wants out of life. And he just asks one question and he gets three answers.
- [2:14] And that's our story. He gets three answers. In fact, he gets three chances to see he asked the wrong question. Wrong question. Here's the question. There it is, 16.
- Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life? He's used to cutting deals, presumably. Hi, very nice to meet you. My name's the rich young man.
- Look, I like you, Jesus. Are there good things about you? I think you and I could cut a deal. I think I would definitely like to be on your team. I think I could contribute something.
- Almost certainly that's his posture. So can we find a way to transact here so we can be in together? Wow. Look at Jesus.
- Look at what Jesus does here. He's kind of firm. Firm, but really friendly. All at the same time. He doesn't embarrass him once. Here we go. Let's have a look at them, shall we?
- [3:12] What must I do to get eternal life? Three chances. Here's chance number one to see the questions the wrong one. Have a look at it. Verse 17. Why do you ask me about what is good?

Jesus replied, there's only one who's good. Now, I say that with a sort of curious voice. But I think you're meant to. How do you do? I'd like to cut a deal. Tell me what good thing to do.

And I think I could be in with you. Ah, interesting question. Why do you ask me about what is good? I mean, the next clause might have been, mate, do you think you're good enough to come to me?

Are you mad? That's what he might have said. But he puts it ever so nicely, doesn't he? And I think I'm justified. Wait till you see the other two. You'll see it follows, I think. There's only one who's good.

Now, the assumption here is that this is a Jewish boy. He's grown up in the family, the Jewish family, the nation of Israel. And he'd have known the Jewish scriptures.

[4:15] And in the Jewish scriptures, there's a regular system of all kinds of sacrifices. Because the sacrifice of animals in a dominant format is to cover the brokenness of human beings who have turned their back on God.

And there would be a universal assumption as a Jewish kid that no one was good enough for God. There had to be intermediaries, usually an animal sacrificed by a priest, so that you could not be judged by God.

So clearly his first premise is super vain, isn't it? Yeah, I think I'm up to going to heaven. I think I, you know, I may not be nine out of ten, but I'm probably a good eight.

I know a couple of nines. I mean, they're definitely in. I'll tell you what, I know a few people who have fours as well. Idiots. But me, I'm probably solid. Probably a bit better than solid, and perhaps you could have a deal.

No, son. No one's good enough. Now, of course, many of us would say at this point, not all, but many people in the room would say, yeah, I see that.

[5:23] I think that's the heart of the Christian message, that no one's good enough, so God had to send his son into the world because somebody who was perfect, who was good enough, had to be the substitute to pay the penalty for those of us who aren't good enough, which is why I've trusted in Christ as my saviour.

Many in the room would say that, and maybe as a visitor or somebody starting coming to church, you're thinking, gosh, I've never really, really grasped that.

Well, let's be clear right at the beginning that human muscle memory, I think, however long you've been a Christian, I mean, I've got a few years under my belt now because I'm ageing fast.

I think the human muscle memory can't stop but defaulting to this. Often when you're a Christian, Christians, do you think this?

When you've done something wrong, I mean, really wrong, you know, even the closest person to you doesn't know you've done it. You know, it's horrid. Inside, do you think, well, I'll keep my distance from God for a while now because I've had an absolute shocker last Thursday.

[6:35] So I better just wind my neck in and maybe try and work up my goodness so I can start talking to him again. It's a remarkable default mode of the human condition to think, well, it's all about how good I am, and if I have a shocking week, then clearly I ought to keep away from everybody and keep my mouth shut and certainly not talk to God.

How weird is that? Well, not weird at all, I would put it here, because it's a default human sickness. Sins are multiple things, all kinds of symptoms for the disease called sin, and each of us will have our own symptoms that plague us.

But the disease itself is self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency shows itself in one of two ways. Hubris. Oh, I'm good enough, don't worry about me.

Or, funnily enough, despair. I'm a disgrace, I'm a shambles. It's the same sickness. Self-sufficiency.

This boy is plagued by the sickness. I fear I am too. What have I got to do? Nothing, son, you're not good enough. Don't even think about it.

[7:46] Stop. You asked me the wrong question. Strike two, here it comes. It looks like a contradiction. Have a look at it. Second half of 17, it looks like a complete antithesis of what he's just said.

17b, if you want to enter life, obey the commandments. Do you see? He's just said no one's good enough. I tell you what, they'll keep the commandments, right? Contradiction. Every Jewish kid knew the Ten Commandments.

Everybody knew there were ten. He'd have known them since he's a dot. He'd know them inside out. Now he's chuffed. Look at this. Do you say chuffed? Okay. It's a bit Welsh, isn't it?

Keep the commandments. 18. Yes. He's like this now. Result. Which ones? Oh, he's cocky now. Jesus replied. Now, you can count these with me.

So there's ten commandments. And of those ten commandments given by God in the Jewish scriptures, four, the first four, we might call them vertical.

[8:49] You shall have no other gods before me. Don't use the Lord's name in vain. It's like me and God. And then the second six are social. You and me. Work through these with me because he lists the social ones, not the God and me ones.

Can you see them? There they are. Look. I mean, you don't have to look at me, but I'm counting them on my fingers. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not lie.

False testimony. Honor your father and mother. Those five are definitely five of the six social commandments. But then he gives a sixth clause. Do you see it? And love your neighbor as yourself.

Looks like it might be the sixth social commandment, but it isn't. He leaves out the sixth social commandment or the tenth overall commandment because the six come after the four.

Love your neighbor as yourself is a summary of the six social commandments, but it's not the sixth. So what's the sixth? It's rhetorical.

[9:53] I'm not testing you. What's the sixth? What's the tenth commandment or the sixth social commandment? Well, that's what the boy should ask, don't you think? Ah, yeah. Listen, I think I'm good enough for heaven, but you're the expert.

I've heard great things about you. I'm a good guy. I can cut a deal. I'm in. What have I got to do? You can't. You're not good enough.

Huh? Well, keep the commandments. Which ones? Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Do not. Leaves the last one out. He's got to say, don't you think?

He's got to say. He's got to say, hasn't he? You left out do not covet. That's the tenth. You left it out. He's got to say.

Why did he leave it out? Because Jesus isn't forgetting it because he's the best teacher this boy's ever heard. And everybody knows them. Why did he leave it out? He's got to ask, don't you think?

[10:54] He should ask. I went to do a year nine assembly in a place called Middleton Keynes recently. Not a nice place. I'm sorry.

All right. Oh, no. Do you come from there? Yeah. And it was a Tuesday morning and it was pouring with rain. And there was a foyer in the school, really huge, perhaps not far smaller than this.

So it was Tuesday morning. I didn't know anyone there. Never been to the school. So I walked in. It wasn't very good, really, because there was no one in reception, you know, safeguarding and things. There was no one in reception. I was the only chap. And there was a boy, about 14, standing against the wall.

Because I didn't know where to go. So I said, excuse me. And then I looked at him and I thought he was going to faint. I mean, he was as pale as the wall. I was worried now because I'm the only bloke there.

And this chap's about to faint or throw up. I mean, look, so ill. I said, you all right? He said, no, sir. I said, oh, no, what's the matter?

[11:58] So he went close. What's the matter? He said, yesterday, sir, it was pouring with rain when we left school to get on the buses. And everybody came through here. So there were hundreds of people in here.

It had nothing to do with my question, obviously. So I said, yeah. He said, yeah. He said, and somebody took that fire extinguisher off the wall and punched it down and sprayed it all over people.

I said, never. He said, yeah. Wow. I said, did you do it? He said, I don't know. He did know.

He did know. I couldn't leave the school. I did the assembly. I didn't leave the school without seeing the head teacher how to ask and say, you know, what happened to the boy who looked sick?

And he said, yeah. He said, he sprayed people with a fire extinguisher. I said, what did you do? He said, well, he got two punishments. I said, oh, what were they? He said, well, one for doing it, one for being really thick.

[13:02] And he said, well, you know, you're going to talk about you. And you're going to talk about you. And the staff would spread around. This boy's an idiot. He's got to tell the truth. He's got to tell the truth. Covert's a funny word.

Do not covet. Clearly what Jesus is doing is saying, mate, you can't cut a deal with me. No one's good enough to come to heaven. You've got a shocking disease. And one of its symptoms is, what is coveting?

Greedy grasping. The actual commandment says, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, husband, I guess. Must not covet their home, their wealth, their possessions.

So here's a boy then who, he just can't have it if you're better than him. He can never be happy for you if it's going fine for you because he's got to beat you.

Deep in his heart, there's a spitefulness. There's an overcompetitiveness. There's a vanity that says, I'm better than everybody. And he's very good, clearly, at his front stage behavior.

[14:08] He masks it nicely. But look out if you cross him, is my guess. He'll have you. And Jesus has spotted it. Now let's give the third reply that gives him the chance to answer now.

What is the worst thing to say to a covetous person, do you think? Where I grew up, it's a bit superficial, but we'd call somebody tight. Do you use that? Tight?

Mean? Last of the bar? Sort of? Yes. Is that what you say? Is that? Yeah. In my street, there was a man called Tom Tite. There was. There was a man called Tom Tite.

I grew up near Dillon Thomas country in Carmarthenshire in Wales. And there was a man called Tom Tite. Well, I assumed he was called Tom Tite until one summer holiday when I was about eight. And I was kicking a ball against the wall outside my house.

And Tom Tite walked by. So I said, good morning, Mr. Tite. Must have felt grown up, I suppose. I was hauled in by my mother five minutes later. Here's how the conversation went.

[15:10] What did you call Tom Tite Tom Tite for? I said, because you and Daddy call him Tom Tite. She said, you silly boy, he's not called Tom Tite.

I said, what's he called then? Tom Williams. Wait till your father comes home. So I pushed off down the park. You know, when my dad was coming home, because I knew I was in trouble here.

I didn't quite know why. So I got home late. Father, in here. Did you call Tom Tite Tom Tite? Yeah.

Yeah. Why? Because you and Mommy do. You stupid boy. Tom Williams. You've been around here complaining to your mother. He wants to see me.

He said, why didn't you work that out? He said, and then he probed me. And then, of course, he gave me. Here's a few names for you. What about Tom Twice? Do you think he's called Tom Twice?

[16:14] I said, yeah. He said, no. Thomas. Thomas. See? Tom Twice. Boy across the road.

I went, ah. It's like digging bats now. Ah. Evans Above. He's not called Mr. Above, is he? I said, well, I thought he was. He said, he's the undertaker, you lemon.

Do you get it? Evans. I'm not joking. Like, these are proper names in my cul-de-sac. And this is the best of it. Dad says, he says, you need to be careful here, boy. He said, you'll end up like Bill Bungalow.

And in our street, there were no bungalows. And it never occurred to me that Bill Bungalow was Bill Bungalow. I said, sir. He said, why do you think he's Bill Bungalow? I said, I don't know.

He said, bit like you, son. Nothing upstairs. He was a nice father. He was a nice father. He was just one of those days. You know, he was just one of those days. What's the worst thing you can say to a self-sufficient, cultural achieving, high attainer, brilliant front stage, gives a fantastic projection of who they are, cuts, steals, everybody loves them.

[17:30] What is the worst thing to say to them? Give up your reputation. Expose your reputation. Be willing to lose all your cultural kudos.

So let's see what the third option is that Jesus gives him. Verse 21. If you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give them to the poor.

And then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. The Bible has plenty to say about wealth and poverty and social justice. Don't confuse this story with that.

Don't confuse that with that issue. Do you see why? This is a story for him. This is the state of his heart. This is the symptom of self-sufficiency.

It could have been anything, couldn't it? It could have been theft. It could have been sexual immorality. It could have been anger. It could have been vindictiveness.

[18:31] Those weren't his symptoms. His symptoms were total disdain that anybody could be as good as him. That was his big symptom.

But it was only a symptom of the deep disease. That he's the center of the world. He wasn't a man. Clearly he was prone to be in despair. He was a man who was prone to self-confidence.

And Jesus said, I'll tell you what then. You think I'm a mug? Jesus could have said. He said, you think I'm a mug? You approach me.

You must know things about me to talk to me like this. To come and cut a deal with me. And you say to me, what have I got to do to go to heaven? I've given you two chances already.

You can't do anything. Look in the mirror, son. You know there's things in your heart that you wouldn't tell anybody else. So I've given you a chance.

[19:29] I said to you, well, which have you failed in? And you didn't have the courage to say to me, I'm really, really, really arrogant in my self-sufficiency.

And I want to beat everybody. And I'm going to beat everybody. You wouldn't admit it to me. He said, I'll tell you what then. Here's the deal. Give everything away that gives you cultural respect.

Become somebody who's a nobody. And you're in. That's what you've got to do. And you're in. It was very specific to this man. In fact, in Mark's account of this story, because this account is in two other of the New Testament Gospels, stories of the life of Jesus.

In Mark's account, there's a different phrase by the editor, Mark. He throws a phrase in here that says, Jesus looked at him and loved him. Isn't that a strange thing? It's almost as if his empathy went to him, because the man could not, could not let go of being in charge of his life, because he was such a success.

When the young man heard this, he went away sad because he had great wealth. I would be a poor, excuse me, I'd be a poor messenger, wouldn't I, of Christ when it's my privilege to have read this story and prepared it to offer it for you to think about this morning.

[20:55] I'd be a really poor messenger, wouldn't I, if I didn't say off the back of this story, are you in the position of this young man?

Approaching God and saying, I'd like to be a Christian. I'd like to have a relationship with you. I'd like to go to heaven is one thing.

It's an entirely different thing. Actually, the Bible's name for it is repentance. It's an old fashioned word, but it means, it literally means in its original language, walk it, turning around 180 degrees, going the wrong way down a motorway and turning around.

That's how you, repentance, that's how you define it. Human beings, and this is hard to take. This young man couldn't take it. He went away sad. The instinctive human condition is to say, there's God, and I'm walking this way.

It's my life. I'm in charge of it. I'll run it my own way. I won't need you. I'll be respectful to you. I'll tip my hat at you. I'll show up at things where people talk about God and the Christian faith.

[22:12] But look, in the end, stay in your lane. Stay over there. Keep a distance from me. It's my life, and I'm going to walk it my way.

That's what sin, when you hear the word sin, fundamentally, that's what sin means. I am in charge. You're not. I'm the one who runs my life. You don't. So I'm happy to do a deal with you.

I'm happy to come close sometimes and turn up at something and maybe look at a book or read the Bible, say a prayer. But really, in the end, just keep there. I'm not turning around. I'm not coming to you.

I'm not giving my life up to come to you. And this man can't do it. And it's a miracle if somebody can. You understand that, son of you. It's a total miracle that you can do that.

You would never do it by your own volition. It's a divine intervention. So if there is a woman or a man in the room today who's saying, I've never really thought about it this clearly, then it's a divine initiative in your life.

[23:13] Regardless of your mom and dad, or your parents, or your background, or your friend, you may be moving from second hand to first hand in your relationship with your creator. Because at that moment, when you realize, he loves me, not my friend.

He wants me to come back to him and turn around. It's a very beautiful moment in a human's life. Very, very, very beautiful.

Turning to Christ. Repenting. Well, this man can't do it. He doesn't believe Jesus. So here's the end of the story. Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth.

There's that word again. It's hard for a rich man. Shall we call it self-sufficient person? It's hard for a self-sufficient person to enter the kingdom of heaven again, I tell you. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

I think there's a bit of fun or irony in that. Ridiculously. Because people would be used to camels in the street and they had a little gate to Jerusalem called the eye of the needle and a camel couldn't get through it.

[24:22] Unless you're in the zoo, there's no camels in Edinburgh, so we're not laughing at it, right? But, you know, he's trading on it. It'd be easier for a camel to go through that little gate than for a self-sufficient human being to get to heaven.

Have a new life. Get a new start. Have a new heart. Have a new meaning, purpose, hope. Have a new reason to get up every day. Oh no, it'd be harder for a camel to do that.

Easier for a camel to do that. Well, look, let's draw it in. The disciples can't believe it. They can't believe it. Look at 25. I mean, they are astonished. They say, but he's an unbelievable bloke.

What are you doing? I mean, we'll never meet a nicer bloke than him. If you're trying to build a brand, get him in. I mean, you'll collect all sorts of people.

Your church will be heaving. Get your man in. He's an absolute winner. He wants to do a deal with you. Do the deal. Do the deal.

[25:18] And he says, boys, you don't get it, do you? It's impossible to do that deal. I can't do that deal. No one's ever doing that deal. He can only come to heaven when he realizes he's walking the wrong way.

He's turned his back on me and he turns around and he walks to me. If he walks to me and says, I can't do anything, but you've done everything. Christianity isn't spelled D-O, is it?

It's not what you do. It's what Jesus has done. And at this stage of the story, they can't get it.

Not yet. Or one day they will. One day they will. But not yet. And then finally, God, Jesus looked at them and said, with man, with human beings, this is impossible.

But with God, all things are possible. You can't achieve a relationship with God. It's received. It's a gift.

[26:19] So there we are. What can I do to get eternal life? Nothing. But turn around and watch for the open arms of Christ saying on this Sunday morning, here I am.

You silly billy. Don't you think? I mean, the best thing about coming to church by a million miles is a routine where on a Sunday morning, your form goes off, you sit here for a little bit, you recalibrate who you are and you say, who made me?

How has he reached me? What's my instinctive position against him? How did I live last week? Oh, I made some bad decisions last week. I made some good ones, I made some bad ones.

But on this Sunday, isn't it, we just go, ah, there you are with your arms wide open waiting for me again today. There you are again. Don't you need it every six days? Oh God, just the chance to stop and say, there you are waiting for me, sweeping me up as we sing and pray and read the Bible and discuss it together and he sweeps us up and he says, come on, you fool.

I know you so well. I know your failures. I know your brokenness. I know I love you. Come on with me. Let's start again today.

[27 : 42] So for many of us, it'll be another restart, won't it? Christ has got me. Christ has got me. And I come to church to get my muscle memory back in shape.

No despair. That's too vain. Don't despair. Everyone's broken. He's the saviour. Don't despair and don't be too full of it if it's been really good all week.

Turn to him. And there he is. Hello, darling. And maybe this is the first time it's ever dawned on you that you must turn to him and let his arms wrap you at that cross.

And let him be the good one who dies so that you can live. And then you get out this week and you say, I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive. I've got meaning and purpose that I've never experienced in my heart and in my mind.

Well, with that in mind, shall I say prayer from both sides of that equation? Holy Father, thank you for the Bible.

[28 : 43] Thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ that you have revealed to us through eyewitnesses who captured all that was done and said and wrote it down for us so that we could know what we need to know.

For those in the room this morning who have never quite experienced a first-hand relationship with you, may today be the day, may it have happened now.

This is the beginning of a new life, a relationship with you, going to heaven and knowing that joy now. And for those who have known you, as Graeme said earlier, for 10 minutes or for 100 years, may we know the joy of forgiveness and new life again today.

May we remember, it's impossible with us, but everything's possible with you and you're our best friend and our greatest ally and you'll always be there a quarter to three in the morning without fail when we need you.

You never will disappoint us. And we thank you for these things as we sing together now to celebrate these wonderful truths. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 02] Amen. Amen.