

“The Lord God and the gods”

Matthew 19:16-26

Dr. Dan Doriani

Today I want to read to you about an encounter a very confident man had with Jesus. This is God's word. Please listen.

¹⁶ And behold, a man came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” ¹⁷ And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁰ The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Let’s pray for a moment. Lord, give us ears we pray to hear about the danger of self-confidence and false gods and the call to follow you. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

As we talk about climate more and more and cultures today, we hear warnings about storms that will come in the summer. More hurricanes at least. Maybe more hurricanes and of course tornadoes and all the rest. A number of years ago, I saw some very striking pictures after a hurricane hit the coast, primarily of Louisiana and Mississippi, somewhat Alabama as well. And as the waters rose, much, much more water than people anticipated, people didn't leave where they're supposed to. When a hurricane comes and they were in danger of drowning. And so they were they were getting knives and axes and hatchets and smashing holes in the roofs of their homes, glad to destroy their homes, to stand on top of their houses and be rescued from drowning. Also saw cars, sea cars and floods don't seem to care whether you have a 14-year-old Hyundai or a 14 day old Tesla. They come, they sweep it away, and we learn that material things are fleeting, they're ephemeral, they're easily lost. We shouldn't attach ourselves to material things. Life is far more important than any piece of property.

Now, about two months ago, maybe ten weeks ago by now, I told you about Shackleton and his expedition to the South Pole, an unsuccessful one, because their ship got trapped in ice and slowly was crushed. By the time they realized their boat would be crushed, they had to decide what to take because they had stores of food and clothing and even entertainment for long periods of time in the boat and they had to abandon ship and take only the essential clothing, so they thought, and essential food and essential tools. And there was a dispute about what was needed and what wasn't needed, and what was essential and what was not. And so, to make a point, Shackleton, the leader of the expedition leader, the men took out his gold watch and got near the edge of the water and threw his gold watch into the water. And then he took

out some gold coins he had in his pocket, and he threw them in the water to make the point. You can't eat gold, and we don't really need watches, so stop quibbling. I just threw gold into the bottom of the ocean and it sobered them up. Because life is more important than gold and watches.

Now, Matthew 18 brings up this topic, and it's in this stretch of Jesus teaching where he's talking about the great issues of life quite consistently in chapter 18 at the beginning, that's just one chapter or chapter and a half ago, the question was, who can be great in the kingdom of God? And Jesus said, well, let's not worry about who can be great. Let's just worry about who can enter the kingdom of God. And he said, when you ask the question, who's great in the kingdom of God, I'm worried about you because the truth of the matter is, you've got to enter like a child, humbly. The very fact you're thinking about greatness indicates something is amiss. And then a little bit later, he'd entertain questions from people. And the questions had to do with what do I owe? What do I owe? So some Pharisees came to Jesus and they asked, what do I owe my wife? What is the least? This was the question they were really asking in chapter 19 what is the least I owe my wife? And if I pay just that minimum, can I still be regarded as a decent, honorable man. Because they had debates. They said, you know, if your wife spoils your food, that might be a ground of divorce. Or if your wife twirls in the street or if she just becomes disagreeable. Those are all grounds of divorce. Some Pharisees said, what? Pharisees a law keeper, right? They want to be law keepers, they say, how little can I do and still be honored by God? How little can I do and still be a righteous man in the eyes of society? So I have, you know, we all have guilty pleasures. So one of my guilty pleasures is I sometimes watch the show Shark Tank. Now I watch it, you know, when cleaning up the kitchen or folding laundry, things like that. But anyway, there were two women on Shark Tank and they were presenting their product. And in the process, I don't know if you've ever seen the show, but when they asked for your life story in 60s and they asked these women their life story and the sharks five of them were very happy to hear the life story because these two women to launch their business, I did the best thing to do is to divorce their husbands so they could focus on the business and the sharks thought that was awesome. Boy, you're serious about this low standards.

We have here a man with high standards. He wants to know what he can do to gain God's pleasure, to gain God's reward, to gain eternal life. In fact, what he really asks is, what can I do? What do I owe God so that when I have done it, God owes me specifically. He owes me eternal life? That's the question this particular man asks. He asks what is the most I can do for God so I can gain eternal life? He asks, what is the good I should do? What good thing should I do? It could be translated. Now they talk about the law of God and Jesus says, obey the commands. And he says, well, that's sort of the basics. That's the foundation. I know I have to obey God's law. And by the way, I've done that my whole life. What I'm asking you is, is there something more now in the passage you're reading in Matthew, it's not exactly clear what he means, but over in Luke it's the same story is told with just a little bit of a difference. And it says there in Luke, having done what shall I inherit eternal life? That is to say, what great deed must I

perform? What great thing, what fantastic deed can I summon forth, so that when I've done it, God owes me and must reward me with eternal life?

Now, Jesus, of course, is interested in this and wants to have a conversation. And he asks the man a question. The question is, why do you ask me about what's good? Why are you coming to me with this question? Because, you know, there's only one who's really good and that is God. Now, Jesus is not denying his deity. Jesus is God. He's the Son of God. But this man doesn't know that yet. So he's saying to the man, there's only one who's really good. You understand that, don't you? That is to say, the man comes asking, what good deeds can I perform? And Jesus says, no, let's not talk about good deeds. Let's talk about who is good, not what is good, but who is good. And God alone is good. He's redirecting the man's attention away from himself toward God. There is only one who is good. God alone is good. What must I do still the man asks, what must I do? And Jesus says, well, obey the commandments.

Now, if you know the Bible pretty well, and I know a lot of people here know the Bible very well, and many of you have been trained, you've been trained in making disciples, in evangelism. And you know that Jesus made a mistake here, didn't he? Because when somebody comes saying, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life? What you're supposed to say is you can't do enough good, right? If you've been trained in evangelism, that's you're supposed to say, well, you give me a thumbs up or something if you know I'm driving it, right. You're not supposed to say, how shall I inherit eternal life? Well, follow the law, but Jesus tells you to follow along.

I wonder why he does that. Why don't you just tell them to follow the law? But you know, it's only that tells him for law. He tells them to follow the easy parts. Don't murder. How many people commit murder? That's an easy one. Don't lie. Don't steal. Honor your father and your mother. That's a popular one. People kind of like that one. When? When we look at the commandments, they're. All the commandments are what we call the second table law, the social commandments. But even when the social commandments, Jesus takes away the one that would cause the most reflection, which is you shall not covet, right? I mean, that can at least cause introspection, because, I mean, I steal. I may not go after someone else's beloved, I may not kill anybody, but I may desire to do those things. And so if Jesus had just mentioned, you shall not covet, at least he would have pushed the man to think about his life and what it all means. But Jesus doesn't even do that. He certainly doesn't mention the first table The commandments -- love the Lord your God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. He doesn't say that. He doesn't say have no other gods. He doesn't say, don't take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Jesus does not say to the man, you can't do anything. Strangely enough, he tells a man who trust in his strength to be strong. He tells a man who is full of obedience, so he thinks to be even more obedient. Now I want to say one thing very clearly here. We'll get to why he does that in a second. But the law of God is good, and Jesus underscores the goodness of the law of God in various ways. The law of God is not just a bunch of laws. The law of God is reflective of who God is as he shaped the entire universe. It's not just a series of things we do. God is the life giver and the life preserver. You know this universe doesn't need to exist. God

wasn't lonely or needy or looking for companions. He chose freely to give life and preserve life and not only human life, but the life of angels and all kinds of animals. God's the life giver, and therefore we honor life and we don't commit murder and God's the truth teller. He tells us all the most important truths about ourselves, about the world, about who we are, how we fall short, how we can remedy it, and how to live a good life. And God tells us the truth, and therefore we tell the truth, so we can go through all the commandments, and they all are based on who God is and how he made the world.

We don't commit adultery because God is committed to faithfulness. God makes promises to his people and he keeps them. God makes covenants and he keeps them. God is faithful. Therefore, we are faithful. In fact, the whole world is made to flourish when people are faithful, when business people keep their promises and give a good product at a good price. And when politicians make promises and keep them at least to the best of their ability, and when doctors and lawyers keep sharp with their trade and say, you can trust me and they make themselves trustworthy, this is the way God made the world. God's law is good to call for, for preserving life and for not stealing and telling the truth. It's all based on God's goodness and God's structure for the world.

Still, the man says, what can I do? What can I do to earn God's favor? Now, today, we have answers to this question. And what can I do to make myself a truly good citizen? One answer is become a vegetarian. Stop eating those cute animals. That'll be a good thing for you to do. And what else can we do? If we could endow a scholarship. We could, work in an orphanage. We could volunteer at a school, and. And we could stop spoiling the environment. We could buy an electric car. That's what we should do. Now, I'm actually in favor of cars that are, you know, honoring the environment I myself bought not too long ago a hybrid car that gets 51 miles per gallon if I drive like an old man. If I drive like a young man, I get 47 miles per gallon. So I believe in these things, but I don't, you know, we should treat this world well. But that's not the way we get right with God. Although our society might tell us so. If you want to do what's good Jesus earlier said, A bad tree cannot bear good fruit, and a good tree can't bear bad fruit. In other words, if you want to do the good, you have to be good. That's what Jesus says. Jesus also does tell the man that there is something he can do, but he has to want to do it. That's the issue.

I will just sidebar for a second. So, when I was young man, I loved to play basketball, played a lot of basketball, and I was a college freshman, and I was playing at our school gym, and I was with my friend who was a very good, very good player, and I was a reasonably good player and we were freshmen and so some people from a sophomore intramural team. So, you know, we're freshmen, sophomores asked us to play on their team. We were deeply honored until we got on the team. And then we realized that we were the stars of the team and the players in the team went by our motto. The motto was, we may be short, but we're also slow and lazy. And we lost the first game by, you know, 29 points in the second game by 27 points and there was there was no interest in defense among the players. And so I asked, a friend of mine who was a very good player to come watch one of our games and I said, you know, our defense is just horrendous.

And I know, I know, there's no desire or ability to play Man-To-Man defense, but what do you think? Could we can we play 212 a 231 a31. What do you think might work? And afterward I talked to my friend and he said, Dan, I have these words for you. Find a new team. Because you can't do the good on a basketball court unless you have it in your heart. Right? Unless you have the desire to do good, you're not going to do good.

So here's this man, and that's the issue with him. He wants to know what good he must do. And the question is it in his heart? What's in his heart is self-righteousness. At the moment, Jesus tells him to keep the law and he says, well, I've done all that over in Luke. It says, I've done it all since my youth. So he says, now, if I'd been there, I would have gone after the easiest command to push people on and that's the fifth honor your father and your mother, because nobody honors their father and their mother their whole life. Do they? I mean, if I'd been there with him, I would have said. You mean to tell me you never rolled your eyes at your parents? You never mumbled or grumbled or said, what a bunch of morons my parents and grandparents are. And Jesus didn't do that. Jesus said, oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize you've kept God's law perfectly all the time. Thanks for correcting me. And, good job. But since you asked if there's something else you could possibly do, I do have one idea for you. I'm going to suggest that you sell everything you have and give it to the poor and follow me. If you want to work, that's the work.

Now, let me just summarize for a second.

The man says that Jesus, if I do something great, can I count on a reward? You assume he's kept the commandments. He wants to do something extra. Jesus says, why are you asking me about that? And they keep on going until finally Jesus says, okay, if you want to do something extra here, it is. Sell everything and follow me. But of course, when the man asks for one more thing, Jesus says, I'm going to ask for everything. Because to sell all that you have, if you're rich and powerful -over in Luke it says he was also a ruler - so he was rich and powerful to sell all that you have is to give up everything. Jesus is calling for a sacrifice here.

Now. Jesus has a right to do that because he gave his life, his body, to the point of death for us. And so he sacrificed for us and he asks us to sacrifice back. The commandment, as we hear it is an emphasis on selling. That's what we hear. It's the only time in the whole Bible, God or Jesus asks anybody to sell everything and so we hear that. But the truth of the matter is, the emphasis in Jesus mind is not on sell all, but on give it and even more on follow me. The goal is not to sell it for the sake of selling it. The goal is to sell it and give it to people who are in need. Clothes, the cold, feed the hungry, visit those who are alone, give money and you're a marvelously generous church praise God, give money so we can build schools and start churches and do work overseas and take care of the needs in our community. The goal is not to sell, but to sell and to give and then to follow. Now what Jesus is doing, of course, is not only telling him to do good, but he's also labeling his rival God which happens to be money. Jesus says in one place, you cannot serve both God and money. God and mammon. The word mammon means is a word that means money, but the root meaning of it is trusted thing. One

of the names of money is thing we trust. And so Jesus says, give up that thing that you trust in the Bible.

In other places says similar things about giving up. And there's one place and people don't like this first very much. Paul says in one place, there God is their belly. Which does not mean we're talking about being overweight. The word belly does not mean this. It means the seat of your appetites, where you feel desires. There God is desires. They live for their desires, which you can do if you're, you know, if you're thick or thin and you can live for desires, they may have nothing to do with material things. It might be a desire for respect or glory or honor or dignity or promotion. So you can feel good about yourself. Now, let me just pause.

I don't do this very often, but today I have 5 or 6 or 7 lessons -- I just want to draw them out before we get too far about all this.

The first lesson is that Jesus has no tolerance for half measures. He doesn't say sell 28% of your of your property. He says if you want to really dedicate yourself to me, you have got to sell everything. By the way, if your family is your God, you have to make sure you put God before your family. I know people say always in our culture right now, family first – I've got to say family second. Love the family. But family second, that's number one.

Number two, the goal is not to sell per se. The goal is to sell in order to give. There are a lot of people that give so they don't feel guilty about how much they consume. That's not the goal. The goal is to give the people who are in need to give wisely, to care for people.

Number three, Jesus says, sell all. Follow me and you will have treasure in heaven. If you follow me, not the work, but if you follow me, you will have treasure in heaven. You'll have eternal life.

Number four. I do believe we should be ready to sell things. You know, the early church had this marvelous problem that at the Pentecost, the first proclamation of Christ to the world publicly by the Apostles, the Holy Spirit fell and thousands of converts were made that day, and many of them had come from great distances to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. And they stayed, and they started to run out of money. And some of the earliest Christians sold their fields to take care of people who had made that journey. There is a time to actually sell things sacrificially.

Number five is that Jesus life is a pattern for ours. It's from Matthew 10. Look at these words. Jesus is speaking here. He's talking to his disciples. And he says, *A disciple is not above his teacher. Jesus was a teacher, nor a servant were his servants. If you believe in him above his master, it is enough. That's understatement. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher and a servant like his master. I have given my life for you, and therefore I ask you to sacrifice. I'm not asking you to give up anything that I haven't done.* We're his. He bought us for the price. The price of his own lifeblood. And so he says, *I want you to act like you are mine.*

Number six - The Lord asks us to give up what is most precious to us. So, if money isn't precious to you, I got to tell you something is. it maybe your reputation, and you may have to sacrifice

the way people view you to take a stand about something unpopular and lose your reputation. You may have friends everywhere. You may be an influential person, and in order to do what is right, you may have to offend people or make people think, oh, I'm not sure I'm with this man, this woman as much as I thought, in order to do what is right and be a disciple, an athlete may need to give up his or her body. A prestigious person may need to humble himself or herself. We have to divest ourselves of all lesser loves.

Now, I vacillated on whether to tell you this or not, but I wear a little bracelet I guess is the only word for it. I hope you don't think I'm a girly man when I say that. It's got a lot of green, a lot of blues, some purple in it. But I don't wear it for that reason. I wear it because my granddaughter made it for me and it has a word, and the word is Papa. And I wear it because I want to remember my grandchildren who are all in Saint Louis, where I come from. And I have to tell you, I want to put my family second. I do, I do. I would be lying if I said to you, I always am glad I live in Birmingham, I like you, I like you all a lot. You're great people. But once in a while I think, what am I doing here? I am not holding my grandchildren. I'm not playing games with them. They all live near my house in Saint Louis, and I wear this to remind myself that before God, I made the decision to come here and say goodbye to my children and grandchildren for this season. I'll be going back from time to time for sure. But I wear this to remind myself how much I love my grandchildren and my children. But I don't want to put them first. No matter how much I love them. I want to love them. Second. I want to love my children second, some ways, even my wife second, loving God more. God says, you tell me what you could love first, and I'll tell you it's hard to give it up. Nobody says I've broken with my deity. And I'll never fail again. I'll never be tempted by that again. That's not the way the human life works. But by God's grace we can try and maybe make a little progress. Maybe break the grip of lesser gods.

Well, this particular man was not able to do that. Says that he heard what Jesus had to say, and he went away grieving. And Jesus, you know, he loved the man and was sorry that the man left. His problem was not that he didn't sell everything, but that he didn't follow the first command. You know, Jesus didn't mention the first commandment - Love the Lord your God. But when he said, sell all and follow me, he was telling him the first commandment, you love me more. Alas, he loved his money and all that. It wins for us because let's not deny for a second that our secondary gods all bring us something. Money gives us food and clothing and shelter and parties and good times and health care and housing and education and we can invite people into our lives because we say, come to the baseball game, come to the concert with me. And wealth has its advantages. Gotta let it go. This is unusual. It's not common for someone to come to Jesus and leave empty handed. In fact, this is the only clear instance in the Gospels where somebody comes to Jesus and says, I want to receive from you. I want you to heal me, love me, care for me. And then and then it ends poorly with him walking away.

The good news is that the Bible gives us a counter story. And the counter story is the story of Zacchaeus who was also a wealthy man. And over in Luke, just 20 or 30 verses after the rich young man says, no, Zacchaeus, another rich man, says, yes. And he sold everything and

followed Jesus just the way Jesus said, so we can break with our gods and we have a picture. You have a picture, and if you're a believer, you have a picture of what this looks like. And if you're an unbeliever, you also have a picture because some people are unbelievers. And if you're an unbeliever, we're glad you're here. And we hope you consider the claims of Christ and the call to give up lesser loyalties and lesser gods in order to follow the God who truly gives life. Zacchaeus did that, and by God's grace we can too... choose not to give up money, but to love God and to prove that, or demonstrate that, or give signs of that by giving up our wealth.

The rich man went away sad. Now, in Proverbs chapter 18, there is, a double proverb that talks about this, and we're going to put that on the screen. Now this is what it says. *This is the name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous man runs into it and is safe. So the Lord is our strong tower.* And then the counter proverb, *A rich man's wealth is his strong city. And like a high wall, in his imagination.* You hear the contrast. The Lord is a strong tower. In truth, wealth seems to be a strong tower in our imagination. It is. Wealth brings many friends. The Bible says friends in the sense of companions, convivial pals, people who come to your house for a barbecue or will go to a game with you. Maybe, an exciting football game. I've got four tickets. Would you like to come? I'll be your friend. Wealth brings many companions. The Bible also says wealth brings many new friends. But a poor man's friends desert him. And what that means then is that, Wealth gives you friends. As long as you're wealthy, you're a patron, you're a helper, you're a party giver. People will stick near you until they don't. Maybe when the money runs out. This man didn't want to give that up.

Jesus comments. It's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom. In fact, it's about as hard as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, by which we mean it's impossible. Now, some of you may know Bible backgrounds a little bit. Maybe you've heard this one. Who's heard that? There's a needle gate in Jerusalem, a needle gate in Jerusalem. You heard that one? Okay, you've heard it. I'm going to just tell you in advance. It is a fabrication made up by a guide in the year 1157 named Abdul Wadi Kahele I am a guide. That's his name (☺). There is no needle gate. Somebody made up the story because they wanted to tell people that if you're really rich, it's hard to enter the kingdom. You've got to bend down and your camel has to take off its pack and all of its riches, and you're going to scoot through with great difficulty. When Jesus says it it hard, he means it's impossible. It's impossible of all for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. By the way, it's also impossible for a poor man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And here's one reason why -- poor people have their false gods too. And in fact, poor people can be as addicted to money as rich people can. It's impossible. Try pushing a camel through the eye of a literal needle. That's how hard it is. It's impossible. But with God, all things are possible. So this man can be saved. But the disciples boggle at this. They say, Jesus, how can you say it's hard for rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? We're amazed? We're astonished. This doesn't make any sense to us because as far as we know, godly people are blessed materially. That was true of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah, and a whole bunch of others. When you follow God, you get rich. It's actually true to this day. To this day, if you follow

God, you start doing things, you start being industrious, and you don't spend all your money, you start saving it, and you do things that tend to lead to wealth, or at least at least a modicum of prosperity. So this is still astonishing today. And the idea is very simple. With man, it is impossible to give up false gods. But with God everything is possible by the work of the Holy Spirit bringing conviction into our lives. People think that their wealth will give them joy, and it does give them some joys, but they're fleeting. Bible says, *the Lord is my rock. He is my shield. He is my stronghold. He is my salvation.* People think my wealth is my stronghold. It's kind of strong, but not as strong as God. Not even close. The Bible says, you know what real riches are? Real riches are godliness with contentment. Real riches are being happy with what you have as you follow God.

Money is a good servant, but a poor master as all lesser gods are. There's a movie that came out years ago. It's actually a baseball movie that's based on a soccer novel, and it's called Fever Pitch. It works because a soccer field is a soccer pitch. And in baseball you also have a pitch. And the protagonist of the movie loves baseball. And he lives in Boston. He loves the Boston Red Sox. And he's maybe 35 or so about the time when men start to think about getting married, if they haven't done so already, and he meets a girl, a woman, and they're really hitting it off. And at one moment in the movie, he has to make a choice to do the right thing in their relationship or go to a very strategic Boston Red Sox baseball game. And he's about to go to the baseball game and lose the girl. And one of his friends said to him, you love the Boston Red Sox. Do they love you back? He answers, no, they do not. And it wakes him up and he doesn't go to the game and he wins the girl. I don't want to ruin the movie for you. He does the right thing. He gave up a lesser god. And that's what the Lord asked us to do. Not. Not because he likes to demand things. Because that's the way of health and healing and a good life. And not only good life, but it's the way of eternal life. And so I plead with you to learn the lesson of this rich young ruler who wanted to follow God, but he wanted to follow a lesser God even more.

Take heed if you don't yet know Christ, take heed. There's only one God who endures. And if you're a believer, know who you are. You're a person, a man or a woman or child who did say yes to God and said, I lay aside all of us are gods. And I'm willing to reaffirm that. I'm willing to lay aside my lesser gods yet again by your grace for your glory.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly father, I do pray that we would hear what you're saying to us through this young man, this young man who asked a marvelous question, a confused question, but an important question. He wanted to know how it could be right with you. And he couldn't do it. And maybe nobody can. Surely nobody can by themselves. And so, Lord, let us take heed and let us learn the call. Not so much to sell, but to follow the Lord Jesus. By faith we desire to do that. We know we fall short. We second guess ourselves. We slip into old patterns, forgive us of that, and set us back in the way of life. Life now and life forever. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.