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“If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments” (Matt 19:17).

The dialogue between Jesus and the young man seeking eternal life reveals a lot about both his motivation and its limits. In confronting him, Jesus confronts all would-be disciples, including us.

He begins by asking Jesus what good he must do to gain eternal life. He still sees the gift of eternal life as something he can earn by accomplishing some good deed. He doesn't understand yet that eternal life so far exceeds our merit or virtue that no one can earn it. God is the Source of all good, and life with God is a pure gift. The notion that he can gain God by observing the Law, even perfectly, is what filled the scribes and Pharisees with pride and a sense of superiority over others.

But seeing his sincerity, Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, the entry level to virtue by at least avoiding evil. The man embarrasses himself by asking, “Which ones?” But Jesus obliges him by summarizing the basics that will put order into his life as a beginner on his way to living a moral life. The man seizes upon the list and announces, “All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?”

At this, Jesus probes the young man's belief that he can negotiate his way to salvation. He is apparently a man of means and used to buying what he wants. Jesus tells him to sell his possessions and give it to the poor and then come, follow him. The young man is deflated at the thought of relinquishing his power and privilege, and he walks away sad.

The young man asked the right question: “What must I do to gain life?” What he failed to grasp was that only love enriches us and prepares us to know God.

Following Jesus makes love our highest priority, and this focuses our lives on what money cannot buy and power can never claim—relationships that empty us of ourselves and draw us into the needs of others. This is where God lives, and those who love generously find God in losing themselves in acts of love. This is life, both here in this world and in eternity. This is the joy of the Gospel.

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