

**A Commentary on the Holy Bible  
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An extract from Matthew 19:16**

**Was the rich young man,  
who asked Jesus what he should do to have eternal life,  
actually Saul of Tarsus?**

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*And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?* Mat 19:16.

And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? Mk 10:17

And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? Lk 18:18

“one”:

14/7/2014 FW: this man is commonly known as ‘the rich Mat 19:22-23 young Mat 19:20 ruler Lk 18:18’. This is the result of defective biblical exegesis in which the three Gospel accounts have been rolled into one. The difference in these and similar accounts in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is known as the Synoptic Problem, a problem created by biblical textual critics. It arises because of the unwarranted assumption that one Gospel writer is consulting or copying another Gospel writer. Rather, we have no proof that any of them had read the other Gospels before they wrote their own Gospel. The likelihood is that they had not, and internal biblical evidence suggests that they had not. The Synoptic Solution is the proper analysis of the synoptic accounts, and when it is applied to this incident we will conclude that there are three different people involved in speaking with Jesus on this occasion. The ruler was rich Lk 18:18,23 but we do not know if he was young Mat 19:20. There may have been no rich, young ruler. See my comments below for an analysis whether one of them may have been Saul of Tarsus when he was in Jerusalem studying at the feet of Gamaliel Act 22:3. - See more at: <http://www.donaldboyd.org/#sthash.WosRDIjL.dpuf>

“one came”:

4/10/2009: when I was a church deputy in New Zealand in 1988 a woman in Auckland Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland asked me if this young man Mat 19:20 might have been Saul of Tarsus. I have thought about it for years but I didn’t think that there is enough material to confirm this. However a recent exegetical point I came across about Paul’s confession to his miscarrying earlier in his life, see my comments in 1Cor 15:8, together with my comments in 2Cor 5:16 ‘though we have known Christ after the flesh’, might give some credence to this opinion.

14/5/2012 FW: is this man the same as the rich ruler Lk 18:18?

16/5/2012: if this is Saul of Tarsus, then why do none of the Gospel writers name him? It is possible that either they did not know because Paul did not make the information generally available, or if they did know that they may not want to divert the attention of the reader at this point in their narrative, 1. knowing that Saul's reputation would prejudice some Jewish readers; 2. considering that it would be a distraction in the narrative to introduce his name; and 3. thinking that it may not reflect well on the apostle Paul. It was evidently a significant event because it is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is often thought that this young man never became a disciple, but this is an assumption and how would the Gospel writers know that at some point in the future he *never* became a disciple? They do not say so; the main message of the incident is not what the future outcome is, for we are not told it; there is teaching from the incident independent of its future outcome.

30/3/2014: However, a different outcome may be suggested by Mat 19:26 'with men it is impossible, but not with God', and this would tie in with Saul of Tarsus, for whom conversion had seemed impossible to all who knew him. Jesus begins His response with murder Mat 19:18, and He maintains the order of the commandments from the sixth to the ninth commandment. Just as one expects the tenth commandment, He reverts to the fifth commandment Mat 19:19, and He omits the tenth commandment – the very commandment which was later to convince the apostle Paul of sin Rom 7:7. It is almost as if the Saviour is ensuring that he does not come to sufficient conviction and true conversion at this stage in his life; rather, that he will miscarry 1Cor 15:8. Jesus summarises the main message as the impossibility of those who trust in riches Mk 10:24 entering the kingdom of God without the enabling power of God the Holy Spirit.

28/3/2014: However, the strongest evidence against this being Saul of Tarsus is that Luke, who knew Paul well, applies this incident to 'a certain ruler G758 *archon*' Lk 18:18 and we have no evidence that Saul was a ruler. Would a ruler learn the trade of tentmaking as Saul did? Probably 'Yes', and at least 'Perhaps'. Most Jewish boys learned a trade as a safeguard against falling on hard times, and so it proved useful to Paul. This opens the question whether Saul was a ruler, and especially while young. Saul of Tarsus was about nine or ten years younger than Jesus. He was born and brought up in Tarsus Act 21:39 and was a freeborn Roman citizen Act 22:28. Although the children of slaves who had been given their freedom by Roman masters became Roman citizens, it is unlikely that Paul's father had been a slave. Rather, being a freeborn Roman, sent to Jerusalem as a youth Act 26:4 to be taught at the feet of Gamaliel Act 22:3, Paul seems to have had a wealthy father, raising the possibility that he had a position of authority in Tarsus. Although we are told about Paul's sister and nephew Act 23:16, we are told nothing about his parents. This silence may suggest that he had been disowned by his father when he was converted to Christianity, and thus any claims to hereditary authority were lost to Paul. So it is not impossible that Saul of Tarsus was a ruler at this stage in his young life, but back in Tarsus rather than in Judaea. It is possible that Luke knew this, being Paul's close companion, but why would he not simply mention Saul's name if he knew it was he? Naming Saul would be a distraction in the Gospel accounts at this point; which may be the reason why Matthew and Mark omitted Saul's name from the event if they knew it was he; see my comments in 1Cor 15:8.

However, is it likely that Luke would describe him as a ruler if he knew it was Saul of Tarsus? Possibly, if his aim was 1. to retain Paul's anonymity for the reasons stated, and 2. to enhance

the account by showing that a young dignitary made this enquiry of Jesus. It was certainly Luke's aim to be accurate, with as many contextual details as he could properly attribute to each incident, as can be demonstrated from his writings. This would be sufficient reason for his informing us that it was a ruler, while withholding the name of Saul of Tarsus.

However, it is possible that Paul did not tell Luke, and that he withheld even from Luke that he was an *archon* back in Tarsus, which would be old news anyway, in order to ensure that Luke would relate the story anonymously. There are other examples of possible withholding of information, see my comments in Act 13:13. So Paul may simply have related the incident to Luke as 'a ruler came to Jesus', and it became one of many reported incidents that Luke included in his Gospel. Only Luke supplies the information that he was a ruler *archon* Lk 18:18, which may reflect that he knew more about the incident from the apostle Paul, while not knowing that it was Saul of Tarsus.

We must now consider that there is no proof that Luke's ruler is the same as the rich, young man in Mat 19:16,20 or the rich man in Mk 10:17. There are minor variations in the order of Jesus' questions about commandments in each Gospel, but the overall thrust is so similar that most exegetes consider them to be the same incident. I have proven elsewhere that some very similar incidents in the synoptic Gospels are actually different incidents, and there would be many young Pharisees to whom this incident could apply, suggesting that there could be more than one, very similar incident. It is because this incident could apply to several zealous young Pharisees that this raises the question and allows for the possibility that one of them was Saul of Tarsus. After all, if it was not Saul of Tarsus, then we have at least two zealous young Jews, and Paul claims to have been ahead of all his contemporary Jews in his zeal for the law of Moses Gal 1:14. If there were two, there could be three or more. However, it is too much to think that the disciples responded the same way with astonishment to each similar and separate incident. The similar reaction of the disciples and the teaching of Jesus in each Gospel suggests that it is the same incident. However, it is not impossible that there were several, similar enquiries to Jesus at approximately the same time, one enquiry provoking the next one. This happened with the disciples at the Lord's Supper, when 'one by one' they made similar enquiries 'Is it I?' Mk 14:19. At the Lord's Supper Jesus did not respond individually to everyone of them, but collectively, and finally He responded to Judas Iscariot's enquiry bringing up the rear. Also, Mark tells us Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus Mk 10:46, but Matthew tells us that Bartimaeus had another blind companion Mat 20:30, with the same request at the same time Mat 20:33. Furthermore, these miracles on leaving Jericho Mat 20:29, Mk 10:46 followed a similar and previous miracle upon Jesus' arriving at Jericho Lk 18:35, suggesting that the report of the first miracle prompted the requests for the following ones. So it is not impossible that one enquiry to Jesus brought forth other similar enquiries. It is possible and even probable that asking about the way to eternal life was a standard question that any enquirer might use to begin a conversation with a rabbi. After one person asked a question, and got a personalised and individualised response, the next person asked the same question in the hope that he would receive a different response, only to be surprised that he receives exactly the same message. Luke tells us specifically that Jesus' response prompted those within earshot to enter the conversation Lk 18:26, showing that one question would lead to another. Others overheard Jesus speaking to the ruler and joined in, so why may not the ruler have responded to something he heard Jesus say to another rich person? Each person that asked was told the same message with similar results.

The order of events is open to consideration, and it can be ascertained from the narrative. Mk 10:17 shows that the whole incident was while Jesus was walking, giving scope for several people nearby to approach Him with a similar question. The context was the radical teaching that Jesus began to explain in His last journey to Jerusalem prior to His crucifixion. 1. In the north of the country at Caesarea Philippi He began to reveal to His disciples that He was to suffer and be killed at Jerusalem, which He developed during the journey southwards. 2. In this chapter Jesus expounded His radical teaching on marriage, divorce and adultery Mat 19:2-12; Mk 10:2-12, which even His disciples found difficult to accept Mat 19:10. 3. Then we have further radical teaching about entering the kingdom of God at an important synchronising point of the three Synoptic Gospels. At Mat 19:13; Mk 10:13 and Lk 18:15-17, where young children were brought to Jesus for His blessing, Jesus repeats Mat 18:1,3 His teaching that except they be converted and become as little children Mat 18:3 they cannot enter the kingdom of God Mk 10:14-15, Lk 18:17. 4. This radical teaching was soon followed up by His radical teaching on wealth and commitment to following Him in the incident before us.

As Jesus continued on His journey towards Jerusalem, a man Mk 10:21 runs after Him to catch up on Him Mk 10:17. It is possible that Jesus' recent radical teaching on marriage, divorce and adultery had reached his ears and struck a chord with him, and when he heard about Jesus' teaching on entering the kingdom of God, this prompted him to catch up on Jesus, and kneeling down, asked Him what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus catechises him with some relevant questions and in His love for him, He tells him that he still lacks one thing, the commitment to renounce his wealth, to distribute it to the poor, to take up the cross and to follow Christ Mk 10:21. The man rose from his knees, grieved and full of sorrow, and dropping back, followed behind Jesus' company Mk 10:22, possibly so that Jesus would not see his grief. Witnessing this incident, a rich young man Mat 19:16-22 falls into step beside Jesus and asks the same question, possibly hoping for a different answer. Jesus repeats to him the same line of questioning about the commandments, and the young man responds similarly to the first one that he has kept all these from his youth, but learning from Jesus' former response, he adds 'what lack I yet?' To his surprise and sorrow, he receives exactly the same message, that if he would be perfect, he should sell his possessions, distribute to the poor and follow Christ Mat 19:21. He also withdraws sorrowful for he had great possessions Mat 19:22. Finally, a certain ruler Lk 18:18 then replaced the second man by Jesus' side and asked the same question, hoping for a better response, but he encountered the same series of questions and answers Lk 18:18-23. Realising how much he had to lose as a wealthy man and a ruler, and how unable he was to commit to this, he was very sorrowful. The first two men withdrew from Jesus' immediate company, possibly to hide their sorrow from Him, but the ruler did not, and when Jesus saw His sorrow Lk 18:24 He began to expand the topic to illustrate the difficulty of rich men entering the kingdom of God. Not all in the company could hear this, but those walking nearby, in close proximity, joined in the discussion with their own questions Lk 18:26. As the discussion widened, finally Jesus looked round to address His disciples Mk 10:23, and probably stopped walking. Jesus had reiterated and reinforced the same practical message to the triumvirate as individuals – to sell all, to distribute their wealth to the poor and to follow Him – and now Jesus follows through Lk 18:27 with this fourth, but general and public reiteration to all His disciples about the impossibility of those who trust in riches Mk 10:24 entering the kingdom of God without the enabling power of God the Holy Spirit. The disciples are astonished Mat 19:25; Mk 10:24; Lk 18:26 at His teaching and the discussion continues collectively. Thus it is one incident with three persons, and this being so, Saul of Tarsus could be one of them.

The order of the triumvirate of questioners can be ascertained: it began with the man in Mk 10 running after Jesus with his enquiry, which he already had and was not prompted by any prior discussion among the others in the company. This suggests that he initiated the exchanges, and his kneeling before Jesus with his enquiry drew the attention of those near by. It is possible, but less likely, that when he caught up with the company, he overheard others asking this question ahead of him, and he then joined in. So the man in Mk 10 is the first enquirer. The exchanges concluded with the ruler in Lk 18 whose sorrow Jesus noticed, to which He responded and which led into the general discussion with the disciples; thus the young man in Mat 19 is between the other two men.

If Saul of Tarsus was one of these, which is the most likely contender? There is no necessity to choose the ruler, although he is not impossible. Of the other contenders, we are told that Jesus loved the man in Mk 10:21 and to this man only does Christ mention taking up the cross; it is not said to the rich man in Mat 19:21 nor to the ruler in Lk 18:22. So if we must choose one, it seems that it is the kneeling man in Mk 10:17 whom Jesus loved Mk 10:21 – and Saul of Tarsus miscarried on this occasion and failed to come to spiritual birth 1Cor 15:8. In summary so far: 1. if Saul was a ruler, then whether or not this incident refers to one, two or three people, he could be one of these rich men; and 2. if he was not a ruler, then he could be one of the other two men as it is possible to separate out three people in this one incident.

Another consideration is whether it is likely that Saul of Tarsus would make such an enquiry of Jesus of Nazareth. He was taught by Gamaliel in Jerusalem, most likely in his teenage years before Jesus' ministry, and this gave him time to become a zealous Jew in his early 20s when Jesus was teaching in Jerusalem, as he was about ten years younger than Jesus. This means that he may have seen Jesus in the distance but his Jewish zeal was such that he would have nothing to do with Him and he would not listen to Him; however, his antipathy toward Jesus may not be so well developed at this early stage in his life, and thus he may be this young man in Mat 19:16, or the one whom Jesus loved Mk 10:17, or even the ruler Lk 18:18.

Either of these scenarios, whether he kept his distance or came to Jesus, may be what Paul means by 'miscarrying'; see my comments in 1Cor 15:8. How did Mark know that Jesus loved him? Did Jesus say so at the time and, if so, why? or does this hint at Mark's knowledge that this was Paul, whose name he suppressed for the reasons already given, or possibly because of his difference of opinion with Paul Act 13:13.

There is nothing to prove that this incident refers to Saul of Tarsus. If one insists that one person is described in all three Gospels, that the use of 'ruler' Lk 18:18 militates against Saul, that Saul's Jewish zeal would prevent his coming to Jesus with such a question and, rather, he would show his zeal by having nothing to do with Jesus, then one would conclude that this is definitely not Saul of Tarsus. However there are exegetical difficulties in insisting that there is one person described in these incidents, and if more than one, then why not three or even more? 2Cor 5:15 'though we have known Christ after the flesh' hints that Paul had at least seen Jesus in the flesh. The incident under consideration did not take place in Jerusalem, and Saul may have taken the opportunity when away from his fellows in Jerusalem to make this enquiry of Jesus, just as Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

It is interesting that the only quotation that Paul makes of Christ's teaching, apart from relating his Damascus road experience, is not a quotation from the Gospels but one that stands alone, and supplied only by him – 'it is more blessed to give than to receive' Act 20:35. This is in keeping with the topic in this incident, and did Jesus say this to Saul on this occasion? Jesus' repeated question, 'Why callest thou Me good?' Mat 19:17, which many exegetes consider to be a hint at His own divinity, may have worked on Saul's mind. After his initial sorrow, this hint at divinity may have contributed to Saul's later antipathy for Jesus of Nazareth as a blasphemer and to his zeal as a persecutor. After he met the risen Lord and was converted, Saul of Tarsus reflected upon the Old Testament teaching about the Messiah during his days of blindness in Damascus, but if he was indeed present at this incident with the rich man, even if only as an observer, he would also reflect upon Jesus' question, which had worked on his mind as one of those pricks against which he had been kicking Act 9:5. The conclusion was now clear to him, and when his sight was recovered he began to preach immediately that Jesus was the Son of God Act 9:20. Paul says that he gave up everything to follow Christ Php 3:7-8, which is the topic in this incident, and although he does not mention 'great possessions' Mat 19:22, nor being a ruler, this may be implied in 'the loss of all things' Php 3:8. Finally, Jesus' following words in Mat 19:30 'many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first' can surely apply to the apostle Paul, the last of the apostles – 'last of all He was seen of me also, as of one who had earlier miscarried' 1Cor 15:8. 5/4/2014: see my comments in Heb 2:3.

*Illustration:* 30/3/2014: 'And Joseph said unto Pharaoh, The dream of Pharaoh is one' Gen 41:25. 30/7/2014: 'He...prayed the third time, saying the same words' Mat 26:44 shows a triple occurrence of similar matter, such as I have proposed for the rich man incident.

*Application:* 30/3/2014: in the Gospels, these men leave a question mark about their future. They were all affected by the force of Jesus' teaching, but what happened to them? How much better to have a clearer outcome. We should leave a clear testimony behind us, rather than leave our grieving relatives with a question mark concerning our eternal destiny. 21/7/2014: I have illustrated here how the Synoptic Solution is applied to the Synoptic Problem.

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