

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

"Why do you call me good?  
Only God is good."

Did Jesus Deny His Deity?  
by Brad Jersak

"Only God is Good."



**Pastoral  
Perspective:**

**"Can I do this  
faith journey  
on my own?"**

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**A**t first glance, the Gospel story of the rich young ruler seems like potent ammunition for those who believe that Jesus was nothing more than a human teacher or one of the prophets. After all, Christ himself seems to deny that he is God or even that he is good. And the difficulties only begin there.

(cont'd on p. 3)

The narrative reads as follows:

<sup>18</sup> *A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

<sup>19</sup> *“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.”* <sup>20</sup> *You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”*

<sup>21</sup> *“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.*

<sup>22</sup> *When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

<sup>23</sup> *When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.* <sup>24</sup> *Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

<sup>26</sup> *Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”*

<sup>27</sup> *Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”* —Luke 18:18-27

## DIFFICULTIES

You can see that the difficulty begins when the ruler calls Jesus “good teacher” and immediately gets pushback. “Why call me good? No one is good but God.” Isn’t Christ distinguishing himself from his Father and even

claiming to be inferior to God?

That’s not all. When asked how to inherit eternal life, Jesus says, “*You know the commandments,*” and cites five of them.

Since when do we earn eternal life by obeying the Old Covenant commands? Why didn’t Jesus say, “If you believe in me, you’ll receive eternal life”?

And then when the ruler claims to have kept them all, Jesus doesn’t respond, “No, it is by grace that you are saved.” Instead, he doubles down and demands that he sell everything, distribute it to the poor and then follow him.

Is Jesus really making a vow of poverty the prerequisite for the heavenly kingdom? Unless I sell my house, my car, my assets and investments, I’m out? That doesn’t sound like good news! No wonder the man went away sad!

I have to ask, “Jesus, what got into you?”

## THE REAL PROBLEM

I propose that if we move beyond first glance to a second reading, we will discover that Jesus is not the problem. We must interpret Jesus’ difficult words as a response to the source of the problem. Namely, the ruler and his misguided question.

The consensus of early church commentators starts with the motives of this ruler. They all question his sincerity.

They see in his question a test or a trap. He’s not expecting Christ to affirm the Law but rather, hoping to tempt Jesus into saying, “Forget Moses’ teaching and follow mine.” But Jesus doesn’t fall for it. He sees through this religious ruler’s strategy.

Second, the rich ruler is a ruler, not a follower. He wields influence and holds power in the synagogue or temple. He’s not ready to leave behind his position of authority in the religious establishment to become a disciple of this itinerant rabbi.

Not only is he attached to his religious “pull”—he’s also

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deeply attached to his wealth. Jesus knew this. The man was like those monkeys who try to steal fruit from a jar and are trapped because they are too stubborn to let go of their fistful of fruit when it's too much to pull through the opening.

In Matthew's Gospel, Christ adds to the five commandments, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* This man was too attached to his holdings to obey the fullness of that Law.

While he loved his power and his pocketbook, a bigger impediment yet remained, preventing him from following Jesus. He takes pride in his own goodness, claiming to have fulfilled the whole of the Law without fail from childhood. His question, sometimes translated, *"What*

**"Blessed is the man who knows his own weakness, for this knowledge becomes for him the foundation, the root and the beginning of goodness."**

**—Isaac the Syrian**

*GOOD thing must I do to inherit eternal life,"* assumes that he has already done every good thing required under the Law and therefore, has already qualified for the Kingdom of God.

The assumption behind his pride is that this is how eternal life works: he thinks it's a transaction—something you can buy or earn with good behavior. It is the rich man, not Jesus, who introduces that error. Jesus must subvert that whole line of thinking in his answer.

## THE REAL SOLUTION

Christ's assertion just prior to the rich ruler's question exposes the man's entire transactional religion in one sentence: *"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."* (Luke 18:17)

Jesus has just said, "You don't earn the kingdom with your power, wealth or goodness. **Eternal life is not purchased—it is received as pure gift, as if by open-handed children or empty-handed beggars.** It is not earned by spiritual wealth and health, but received freely by those poor in spirit and in need of the Great Physician."

In other words, *Salvation comes by grace or not at all!* The rich ruler had missed that crucial point.

Jesus summarizes the exchange by reflecting on how hard it is for the rich (materially or spiritually) to enter God's kingdom. Why? Because they think they can earn it. Indeed, for anyone to gain the kingdom by human merit is impossible. *"But,"* he says, *"for God, all things are possible."* Meaning?

We don't tear our way through the veil into the Holy of Holies. Christ alone could tear down the veil through his own crucified body. We don't buy our way out of death and push our way past the angel with the flaming sword back into Paradise. Christ alone had to open heaven's gates from the inside through his resurrection from the tomb.

Christ alone is that good. Christ alone is that God.

When Jesus asked, *"Why do you call me good? God alone is good,"* he wasn't denying his deity at all. He was prompting the man to answer, *"Who do you say that I am?"*

He didn't send the man away sad because he was too rich for heaven. The man left because he could not recognize the One in front of him. Had he believed Jesus was truly the Messiah, all the power, wealth and goodness in the world would have meant nothing to him. He would have followed immediately, as Jesus' disciples had (see verse 28–29).

## CHIEF OF SINNERS

For centuries, Christians have read this story alongside Paul's words to Timothy:

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.* (1 Timothy 1:15–16)

Paul, that zealous keeper of the Law, saw what the rich ruler did not: Christ did not to save law-keeping Jews or moralistic Christians. He didn't come for the "good." Christ came for "sinners, of whom I am chief." He didn't come for the "worthy,"

## George MacDonald On Jesus and his Abba

but for those in need of mercy. We don't make ourselves worthy—Christ makes us worthy. And while Christ loves everyone and turns from no one, the sad truth is that those who consider themselves more “woke” and worthy are sorely tempted to turn from Christ. But those who are most aware of their need for mercy seem most open and truly awakened to Christ, our infinite source of unflinching grace.

Isaac the Syrian put it this way: “Blessed is the man who knows his own weakness, for this knowledge becomes for him the foundation, the root and the beginning of goodness.”

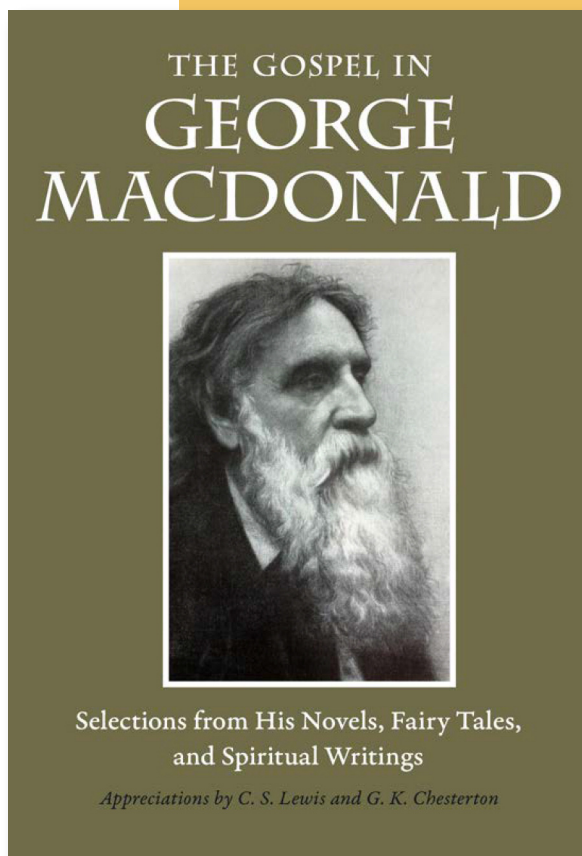
So it is not “unto ourselves” that we depend for eternal life, but “*Unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*” (1 Timothy 1:17).

I would like to end by answering Jesus' question: “**Why do you call me good? Only God is good.**”

Answer: “Exactly. I call you good because I believe you and the only good God, your Father, are one and the same.” □

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What Jesus did was what the Father is always doing; the suffering he endured was that of the Father from the foundation of the world, reaching its climax in the person of his Son. God provides the sacrifice; the sacrifice is himself. He is always, and has ever been, sacrificing himself to and for his creatures. It lies in the very essence of his creation of them. The worst heresy...is to divide the Father from the Son—in thought or feeling or action or intent; to represent the Son as doing that which the Father does not himself do. Jesus did nothing but what the Father did and does. If Jesus suffered for men, it was because his Father suffers for men; only he came close to men through his body and their senses, that he might bring their spirits close to his Father and their Father, so giving them life, and losing what could be lost of his own. He is God our Saviour: it is because God is our Saviour that Jesus is our Saviour. The God and Father of Jesus Christ could never possibly be satisfied with less than giving himself to his own!



The unbeliever may easily imagine a better God than the common theology of the country offers him; but not the lovingest heart that ever beat can even reflect the length and breadth and depth and height of that love of God which shows itself in his Son—one, and of one mind, with himself. The whole history is a divine agony to give divine life to creatures. The outcome of that agony, the victory of that creative and again creative energy, will be radiant life, whereof joy unspeakable is the flower. Every child will look in the eyes of the Father, and the eyes of the Father will receive the child with an infinite embrace. □

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