

To Have Eternal Life

Matthew 19:16-30

What good thing shall I do to gain eternal life? This is the key question not only for the rich young man in today's passage, but for all who want to follow Jesus, for all who want to be pleasing in the sight of God. So how would you answer this earnest young man?

Dr. D. James Kennedy puts the question this way: supposing you were to die tonight and stand before God, and He were to ask you, "Why should I let you into my Heaven?" What would you say?

Well, we would probably quote John 3:16 from our responsive reading this morning. But Jesus doesn't start out by making any sort of theological statement at all. Instead, He demonstrates the pedagogical technique that made Him the greatest teacher who ever lived. For instead of just telling this young man what he wants to know, Jesus asks a series of questions to help him realize where he was already placing his faith.

For at first glance, this young man seems to have been trusting in Jesus – at least to a certain extent. After all, in spite of his wealth, and in spite of his undoubtedly high social standing, he came to ask the advice of this poor, wandering rabbi. Indeed, he submits himself to Jesus' authority, calling Him master or teacher.

And, to a greater or lesser degree, all of us today have done the same thing. We have gathered here for one primary purpose - to hear the words of the Master. But if we are counting on the fact of our church attendance or even the regularity of our personal Bible reading to earn eternal life for us, we will be greatly disappointed on the great Day of Judgment. For on that day, when God Himself asks us "Why should I let you into my Heaven," the amount that we know about the Bible in general or about Jesus' teaching and ministry in particular will do us no good.

For in this passage, Jesus isn't satisfied with the fact that this man knows the commandments. Instead, Jesus probes the extent of his obedience to God's law. Jesus thus asks him if he has ever committed adultery or murder. Jesus asks him if he has stolen anything or told a lie about someone. Jesus asks him if he has respected his parents.

In other words, Jesus asks this young man if he has committed any of the sins most of us would still consider to be socially unacceptable. And the young man insists that he hasn't, just as we might point to our pious respectability to justify our admission into Heaven.

Yes, when God asks us to tell him why we deserve eternal life, we very well might say, "Well, I've never killed anyone or robbed a liquor store. I haven't smoked crack or slept with a prostitute. I've held down an honest job and done an honest day's work for an honest day's pay all my life. I'm no cheat. I'm no moocher. I'm an upstanding member of society.

But just as Jesus isn't satisfied with this young man's knowledge, neither is He satisfied with his respectability. For the sad fact is that neither what we know nor what other people think about us will make any difference on that great Day of Judgment. No, the only thing that will matter on that day is what God thinks of us.

And in no small measure, what God thinks of us is directly related to what we think of God, or more specifically, how important we consider God to be. And Jesus rather neatly reveals this young man's priorities by asking him to give up the thing that turns out to be the most precious to him – his money.

And perhaps some of us have the same problem. After all, we Americans are far and away the wealthiest people in the world, and some of us are well off even by American standards. We're certainly wealthy when compared to many of the other residents of our community, living as we do in one of the poorest regions in one of the poorest states in the country.

But make no mistake – in this passage, Jesus has some very strong things to say about money. In fact, in verse 23 He goes so far as to say that it is hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God. Now, this teaching caused quite a shock to His disciples, because their culture usually associated wealth with blessings from God. They

thus looked at rich people as those on whom God had bestowed special favor. And so they wondered: if rich folks weren't going to be saved, then who could be?

But aren't Jesus' words just as shocking to us comparatively wealthy modern Americans? For is saying that God has something against rich people like us? Does He mean that we have to divest ourselves of all that we have, like He expected this young man to do? Do we have to take vows of poverty, like a bunch of medieval monks? Is God some kind of a communist?

I don't think so – for if we all followed Jesus' advice and gave away everything we had, we would simply add ourselves to the already long list of needy people in an already poor county. Impoverishing ourselves wouldn't really help anything in the long term.

So instead of being a universal command, it is more likely that Jesus' challenge to this young man was an attempt to reveal his individual priorities, and thus to illuminate the state of his soul. Remember, he had come to Jesus asking what he had to do to gain eternal life. But when Jesus answered him by asking for a price he was unwilling to pay, the young man's money was revealed to be more important to him than his God.

Well, does that mean on the other hand that someone who has in fact given up on material gain is guaranteed a place in Heaven? Peter jumped to this conclusion in verse 27, pointing out with pride that he and the rest of the twelve had done exactly that. They had all left their homes and businesses in order to follow Jesus. They may very well have sacrificed friendships and the respect of their communities in order to become the disciples of a wandering rabbi. And Jesus admits that those who make such sacrifices will indeed be rewarded richly, both in this life and in the life to come.

And so, because they had been willing to give up all their material goods for the advancement of the Kingdom of God, materialism doesn't seem to have been a problem for the disciples. And frankly, I think that's the case for most of the people in this church. After all, Mississippians in general are some of the most generous people in America. And I know from personal experience that whenever y'all hear about a real and substantial need, whether at home or abroad, you are more than willing to meet it. Yes, we may be well off, but we are for the most part generous with our material blessings.

But that doesn't mean we are any more sold out for Jesus than the disciples were. For even though it had cost them a lot to follow Jesus, weren't they expecting to get a lot out of the deal? After all, they thought Jesus was going to Jerusalem to take up power and reign as the Son of David. They were thus expecting to be judges and cabinet ministers in His soon-to-be-constituted government. Yes, they had made rather significant sacrifices to tag along with Jesus, but they were anticipating a substantial reward in the very near future.

And that's why Jesus does the same thing to them that He did to that rich young man: He challenges their expectations. Instead of delivering the worldly power and influence that they craved, in verse 30 He makes it clear that it is the last who will be first. He was thus reenforcing the lesson He had taught His disciples in the verses right before today's passage, when He insisted on blessing the children, the least important and valued members of their community. For on that occasion, he had made one thing very clear: the kingdom of heaven belongs not to the wealthy and powerful, but to the humble and lowly.

And that's in no small measure because of what Jesus kept on saying would happen to Him when He arrived in Jerusalem. In chapter 16:21, and in chapter 17:12, and in chapter 17:22-23 He had already told His disciples that He wasn't going to Jerusalem in order to give them the power and influence they so desperately wanted. And in chapter 20:18-19, He would go on to be even more specific: He wasn't going to be welcomed by the chief priests and escorted to David's throne, from which He would dole out favors to His friends. Instead, He was going to be mocked and insulted and spit upon. He was going to be rejected by His own people and scourged and crucified by Roman soldiers.

So no, Jesus had not in fact come to rule and reign over an earthly kingdom as the disciples had expected. And when His followers eventually figured that out, when they realized they weren't going to get what they wanted out of Him, they would turn away from Him, just as the rich young man did in today's passage. Oh, Peter would

certainly weep on the night that Jesus was arrested – like the rich young man He would go away sorrowful. But instead of giving up his ambitions, He would, in fact, go away from Jesus.

And so if Jesus' question to the rich young ruler is "Will you give up your money for the sake of eternal life?" and if the question to the disciples was "Will you give up your dreams of earthly power for the sake of eternal life?" then He has some questions for us, too. For the rich young man insisted that, if he was going to follow Jesus, he be allowed to take his money. The disciples insisted that they be able to keep their pride and their ambition.

So, what conditions do we place on our discipleship? As we follow Christ what do we insist on taking with us? Our comfortable homes? Our husbands or wives or children? Our health? Do we insist on being happy and fulfilled in our marriages or careers? Do we insist on being in control in our workplaces or our schools, our homes or our churches?

Let's put this question another way: what is it in your life that you would refuse to give up if Jesus asked it of you? Who is it in your life that, if you lost him or her, you would lose your faith in Jesus? Whatever or whoever that is, it is standing between you and Jesus just as surely as this young man's money or the disciples' ambition did. That thing or that person or that situation or that relationship has become your idol, your god, the thing you put ahead of Jesus on your priority list, the thing you truly live for.

And it is that sort of idolatry that is the essence of sin. For whenever we cling to someone or something in spite of God's will, whenever we insist on having our own way instead of God's way, we are breaking God's law. And we all do it all the time. In fact, we tend to be so wrapped up in sin and self, so trapped within our own perspective, so focused on our own needs and desires that all too often we aren't even aware that we are, in this way, putting ourselves in the place of God.

And that means that none of us is good, none of us is truly living in accordance with God's will. So it's no wonder that Jesus told this young man, "No one is good but One, that is God."

Who then can be saved? Who could thus possibly deserve to be allowed into God's Heaven? Jesus tells us in verse 26 – "With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible." And that's the good news – God has the power to do for us and to do in us the things we cannot do for ourselves.

For there's just no way we can possibly love God the way we ought to, the way He deserves. No, as long as we live, the things of this world will keep clamoring for our attention. Our own desires and needs will continue to press themselves upon us, demanding our allegiance. No, the only way we can be free of such a focus on ourselves, the only way we can completely turn away from the idol of self is for self to die. But that wouldn't do us any good, because then we'd be dead. We can't die and live at the same time. Salvation from sin is thus impossible for us.

But it's not impossible with God. For if Jesus told His disciples over and over again that He was going to Jerusalem to die, He also kept insisting that He would rise again on the third day. And He offers all who trust in Him the opportunity to share both in His death and His resurrection.

But how does that help us with our sin problem? Jesus offers to make us clean and pure by allowing us to die with Him to the power of sin and death, to die to the worship of self, to die to our craving for all those things or people or relationships or feelings that we put ahead of Him.

But Jesus also allows all His people to rise with Him to new life, life that is totally focused on God and on others, life that is thus totally good, life that is a taste of Heaven on Earth, eternal life that begins right now.

No, there is no one good but God alone – but God offers to share His goodness with sinners who will confess their sin, their devotion to self instead of devotion to God. God offers to share His goodness with those who turn away from their idols and who surrender to Him. God offers to save all who will admit their helplessness in the face of their sin, trusting Jesus to save them, to do what they cannot do for themselves.

So, today, will you trust God to do the impossible? Will you trust Him to give you a new heart, a heart that is self-forgetful and God-focused? Will you trust Jesus to give you what you cannot earn – eternal life both now and in the age to come?