

To Inherit Eternal Life
Mark 10:17-34

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? This is the key question not only for the rich young ruler, but for all who would follow Jesus. We all want to know what we need to do to be pleasing in the sight of God. So how would you answer this young man's question? What do you think are the requirements to be admitted into heaven?

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 might want to shout out all those answers we learned in Sunday School. But isn't it interesting that Jesus doesn't do that? Instead, He demonstrates the pedagogical technique that makes Him the greatest teacher who ever lived. Instead of telling the ruler what he wants to know, Jesus asks a series of questions to get this young man to realize where he was really placing his faith.

For it seems at first that the young man is truly trusting in Jesus. Although he is a wealthy ruler, he comes to ask the advice of this poor, wandering rabbi. He submits himself to Jesus, calling Him master or teacher.

And, to a greater or lesser degree, all of us today have done the same thing. We have come into this room 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 or even about Jesus' life and teaching and ministry 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. And so Jesus asks him if he has ever committed adultery or murder. He asks 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 still consider to be socially unacceptable. The ruler says he hasn't, and we, too, might be tempted to point to our innocence regarding such spectacular sorts of sins to justify our admission into Heaven.

When God asks us to tell him why we deserve eternal life, well might we say, "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 all my life and done an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. 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. 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, where God comes on our list of priorities. And Jesus neatly illustrates what is truly most important to this young man by challenging him to give up what he values most - in his case it's his money.

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 our neighbors, living as we do in one of the poorest regions in one of the poorest states in the country.

And we have to be honest – in this passage, Jesus says some very strong things about money. He says it's hard for rich people to get into heaven. This was shocking to His disciples, as their culture usually associated wealth with blessings from God. They thus looked at rich people as those on whom God had bestowed special favor. If rich folks weren't going to be saved, then who would be?

And Jesus' words are just as shocking to us modern Americans, wealthy as we are by global and historic standards. Does this mean that we won't make it into heaven? Does God have something against rich people? Is God a communist?

Does this mean that we have to divest ourselves of all that we have? This is, after all, what Jesus told that wealthy ruler. If we are going to follow Jesus, do we have to take vows of poverty, like a bunch of medieval monks?

I don't think so – for if we were to do that, we would simply increase the poverty level in an already poor county. It wouldn't really help anything in the long term.

But on the other hand, Jesus' question to that rich ruler is very revealing of the state of that young man's soul, for it clearly indicates his priorities. Remember, he had come to Jesus asking what he had to do to gain eternal life. But Jesus asks him for a price he is unwilling to pay. It turns out that his money is more important to him than his God.

Well, does that mean on the other hand that someone who has given up on material gain is guaranteed a place in Heaven? Peter seems to think so, for he points out with pride the fact that he and the rest of the twelve have done exactly what Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do. They have 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 follow this wandering rabbi. And Jesus does say that they will be rewarded richly, both in this life and in the life to come.

But then He turns on them just as He turned on that rich young ruler. Maybe greed wasn't their besetting sin. Maybe they were willing to give up all their material goods for the sake of the gospel. And frankly, I think most of the people in this church are more like the disciples than the wealthy ruler. Mississippians in general are some of the most generous people in America, and I know that y'all are willing to give whenever you hear about a real and substantial need, whether at home or abroad. Yes, we may be well off, but we are for the most part generous with our blessings.

But that doesn't mean we are any more sold out for Jesus than the disciples were. You see, they were following Jesus because they expected that He would take up power and reign as the Son of David as soon as He got to Jerusalem. They were expecting to be judges and cabinet ministers in His royal government. They had, in other words, made an investment of time and energy, and they expected a substantial reward in the very near future.

And that's why Jesus challenges their expectations. In verse 30, he mentions that they would receive persecutions in this world. And that's in no small measure because of what Jesus said He Himself would receive in Jerusalem.

For as He told them in verses 33 and 34, when the Son of Man entered Jerusalem, He wouldn't get what His disciples so desperately wanted. He wouldn't be welcomed by the chief priests and escorted to David's throne. Instead, He would be mocked and insulted and spit upon. He would be rejected by His own people and scourged and crucified by Roman soldiers.

No, Jesus didn't come to rule and reign over an earthly kingdom as the disciples expected. He had come to die as a sacrifice for them. And when the disciples eventually figured that out, they would turn away from Him, just as the chief priests and scribes would, just as the rich ruler did in this passage. Oh, Peter would weep with sorrow on the night that Jesus was arrested – He too would go away grieved, but He too would abandon 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 glory for the sake of eternal life?" then He has some questions for us, too. The rich young ruler 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. As we follow Christ what do we insist on taking with us? Our comfortable homes? Our wives and children? Our health? Do we insist on being happy and fulfilled in our marriages? Do we insist on being in control in our workplace, our schools, our churches?

What is it or who is it in your life that you would refuse to give up if Jesus asked it of you? Whatever that is, it is standing between you and Jesus just as surely as this ruler's money or the disciples' ambition did. Whatever it is has become your idol, your god, the thing you 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 it our own way instead of God's way, we are breaking God's law. And we do it all the time. We are so wrapped up in sin and self, we are so trapped in our own perspective, focused on our own needs and desires.

And that means that none of us is good, for goodness is defined as that which is in accordance with God's will. We're all way too focused on what we want for us to have much time for what God wants. No wonder Jesus told that young man, "No one is good but One, that is God."

Who then can be saved? Jesus tells us in verse 27 – "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 in us the things we cannot do for ourselves. No, we can't love Him the way we ought to, the way He deserves – we're too sinful, too selfish. 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 attention and allegiance. The only way we can be free of this 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 as Jesus told His disciples, He didn't come to Jerusalem just to die. He also came to rise again on the third day. And He offers all who trust in Him the opportunity to share in His death and His resurrection.

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 all those things or people or relationships that we cling to and insist on.

And He 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 devotion to self instead of devotion to God, their sin. 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.

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?