

“What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?”

With man this is impossible
With God all things are possible

¹⁷As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’^{1a}”

²⁰“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²²At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is^b to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.” ²⁶The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Tell me, have you ever asked a question that you thought you knew the answer to, but you just wanted to make sure? You know, you're about to put the jumper cables on that car battery and you say, “Dad, it's red for positive, right?” Or you're trying to figure out which way to turn on that socket wrench, “Let's see, it's righty tighty, lefty loosey, right?” Or you're pulling out of the driveway for a week of vacation and there's the inevitable, “Hey, are we sure we locked the front door?” Sometimes we want confirmation that what we think is true, really is.

Well, you realize, that desire to know that we've got it right applies to more than just the little things in life, like where to put the jumper cables. It also applies to the really big things in life, questions like “Where am I going to spend eternity?” “When I die, is my soul going to heaven or is it going to hell?” And we want to get the answer to that question from One who is ultimately going to decide which way I’m going, namely, God. But is it even possible to ask God, “What does it take for me to get into heaven?” Actually, we don't have to ask God that question, because someone else asked it for us. Here in our text for a day, a young man asks the question that deep down we all want to know. In fact, it's our theme for today, namely,

“What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?”

Today we'll see that Jesus offers two answers. When it comes to human beings entering through the gates of paradise, Jesus says:

I. With man this is impossible

II. With God all things are possible

Our text begins with Jesus travelling the roads of Judea, when a young man kneels down

before him and asks a simple question, “*Good teacher,*” he asked, “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Now understand, this was not one of Jesus' enemies trying to set a trap for Jesus. This was not a tax collector or prostitute, with a bad reputation. No, this was a good man, a fine citizen. Luke's gospel tells us that he was a ruler in the synagogue, in other words, a religious leader. This is a man who believes in heaven. He just wants to make sure he knows how to get there. So he asks, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*”

Now one might think that Jesus' answer would be pretty simple: “Just believe in me as your Savior and you will be saved.” Wasn't that the answer that the Apostle Paul gave to the jailer at Philippi? When the jailer cried out in fear, “*What must I do to be saved?*” Paul's answer was what? “*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.*” (Acts 16:30)

But that's not what Jesus says to this man. Why not? Because this young man doesn't think that he needs a savior. He thinks he's doing just fine without a Savior, as his words in just a moment will make clear. So Jesus' first goal is to help this man see that he has a bigger problem than he thinks he has. Jesus does that in a rather unique way. He begins by asking the man, “*Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.*” With those words, Jesus is trying to plant in this man's mind a couple of questions, namely, “How are you defining good? How good is good enough? And who is setting the standard for what good is? And by the way, who do you think I am? Am I simply a good teacher, someone who disseminates spiritual information, or am I much more than that?”

But now, let's go back to the man's question. Notice, how he words it: “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” In other words, the man assumed that his eternal destiny would be dependent on something he did. So Jesus kind of plays along. He says, in effect, “If you think you're going to get to heaven by what you do, what does God say you must do? *You know the commandments: you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.* How does the man respond? “*Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy.*” Aha! With those words, the man's real problem is revealed. The man thinks that he has kept God's law—and he thinks that his obedience to what amounts to the second table of the law, namely, his actions toward other people, should be enough to win God's favor. It should be enough to get him through the Pearly Gates.

You realize, that man is no different from millions of people today who when asked why they think they're going to heaven say things like, “Well, I haven't killed anyone. I'm not a bank robber. I've always been a faithful spouse.” What neither they nor the young man in our text realized is that God demands more than outward obedience to his commandments. He's even more concerned about what's going on in our hearts. That's why Jesus says things like *Anyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer. (1 John 3:15)* or “*Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” (Matthew 5:28). Or what Jesus calls the first and most important commandment, namely, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” (Matthew 22:37)

The question is, how was Jesus going to lead this young man who thought he had checked all the boxes, but wanted to make sure he wasn't missing anything—how would Jesus lead him to see just how far short of God's standards he had fallen? Jesus does it with just one statement. Jesus tells the man, “*One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.*”

Now, maybe you're thinking, “Wait a minute. Sell everything he has?!? Is this suddenly a requirement for gaining access into heaven? Is it true, as some churches teach, that taking a vow

of poverty in this life will earn a person a better position in the life to come?" Absolutely not. That would contradict everything else Jesus ever taught.

So why does Jesus tell this man that he needs to sell all his possessions and give to the poor? He told him that because this man thought that he had kept all of God's commandments. So Jesus goes back to the very first commandment, namely, You shall have no other gods, and says, in effect, "Prove it. Prove that you love God more than anything else, including your possessions." The man couldn't do it. Mark tells us. *At this, the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth.*

What a shame. This man, who so wanted to enjoy the treasures of heaven, apparently loved his treasures on earth even more. Tell me, can you relate? If Jesus made this same demand of you that he made of this rich man, could you do it? Would you do it? Sure, if we didn't have a penny to our name, if we owned nothing but the shirt on our back, maybe it wouldn't be so hard to sell everything we own. But that's not the situation we're in. Compared to millions of people in the world, you and I are filthy rich. And the fact is, the more things we own, the more income we have, the more freedom we have to enjoy the nice things in life, well, the more tempted we are to allow those things to kind of push God to the side. We fall in love with the gifts more than the Giver.

Do you see why Jesus says here in our text, "*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.*" St. Paul says something similar in his letter to Timothy when he writes, *The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:10)* In fact, Jesus illustrates what an obstacle financial wealth can be to a person's eternal life when he tells his disciples, "*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.*"

Now, does that mean that there will be no people in heaven who were once rich here on earth? No. What will keep people out of heaven will not be their wealth; rather, it will be their love of wealth, or more specifically, their love of anything more than God. Isn't that what happened with this man in our text? When Jesus told him "Love God above all things" the man couldn't do it. For him it was like putting a camel through the eye of a needle.

My friends, do you realize the same thing is true for you and me today? Think about it. God's commandments haven't changed. God still says, "*You shall have no other gods.*" God still says, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" If you are like the rich man and you want to know what you must do to gain eternal life, well, there's the answer. Love God more than anything else. In other words, keep all the commandments perfectly. Or as Jesus once said, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" (Matthew 5:48)—

Which maybe has you thinking what Jesus' disciples here in our text were saying. Mark tells us, *the disciples were even more amazed and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" (v. 26).* I mean, it's a natural question. If God demands perfect obedience from anyone who wants to enter eternal life, how can anyone get through those gates? How can anyone live up to those standards? Jesus' answer is right here in verse 27. *Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "With man, this is impossible. But not with God. All things are possible with God."* What does that mean? Well, you know what the first half of that statement means. It means that no human being can live up to the standards God is set for entrance into paradise. No human being can love God perfectly. That's why the Bible says, *There is no one who does good, not even one. (Romans 3:12).* It's why Jesus tells the rich man, "*No one is good—except God alone.*"

But take a look at the second half of that statement. That's where the Good News is found. "*All things are possible with God.*" Don't misunderstand those words. Jesus is not saying that with a little help from God, it's possible for you to live up to his standards. No, a better translation would be, "as far as God is concerned, all things are possible." In other words, you and I can't live holy lives, but God can and has. He's lived it in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was born into this world without sin, conceived by the holy Spirit and born at the Virgin Mary. He lived his whole life without sin. He perfectly kept all of God's commands. The perfect love that God demanded of you, Jesus is now rendered for you. God, in effect, has given you credit for Jesus holiness. That means that when God looks at you, he sees Jesus. He sees you dressed in Jesus holiness. Does God still demand that you be perfect in order to get into heaven? Yes he does. But he's given you that very perfection as a free gift through his son Jesus Christ. My friends, that's how you know where you're going when you die. Because Jesus has given you everything you need to be right with God .

2,000 years ago a man asked the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And now you know the answer to that question. You don't have to do anything. Jesus has done it all for you. That, my friends, is the Gospel. Believe it. And then let the fact that God is given you eternal life on the other side of the grave—let that fact impact how you live your life, how you manage your things, yes, how you prioritize your life, on this side of the grave. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.