

Pentecost
23 October 23, 2016

"What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?"

LUKE 18:18-27

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹⁹ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good-- except God alone."²⁰ You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'"²¹ "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.²² 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."²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."²⁶ Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"²⁷ Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" If it were not for the grace of God you and I would still be asking this question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" If it were not for the grace of God we would still believe there is something we can do to get on the good side of God and have a better place in the life to come. You see, when I was conceived and born into this world I was deeply imbedded, deeply ingrained and deeply entrenched with the natural thinking that I can do something to save myself.

Warren Buffet believes that by giving away lots of money he can provide himself in heaven. The so-called Oracle of Omaha is really smart when it comes to investing his money. But he lacks true wisdom when it comes to how to have eternal. He was once asked why he gave large sums of money to the Bill and Linda Gates Foundation. He replied, "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way."

Before us this morning we have a wealthy man coming to Jesus and asking him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" People who are without Christ ask this question every day. They like to believe that their efforts at being decent people will reward them with blessings in this life and in the life to come. Jesus wants us to know that it is impossible to inherit eternal life by what we do for God. He wants us to know that eternal life is only possible through him and what he does for us.

Impossible without God

It is impossible to have eternal life by what we do because God's requirement for eternal life is that we be perfect. The man who came to Jesus did not realize this. "A certain ruler asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Here was an important person in the community. He had the respect of people. He tried to live a good life. He wants this amazing teacher by the name of Jesus to give him some good coaching to live even a better life. In his mind this would provide even greater assurance that eternal mansions would be waiting for him in heaven.

A couple of weeks ago we celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary. I thought back to the beautiful wedding service we had at St Paul's Lutheran Church in North Hollywood. One of good friends, Victoria Rank, sang "Children of the Heavenly Father." Victoria grew up in Spain where she was well known for her beautiful voice. She often sang for people in nursing homes and in hospitals and other charities. She said her mother once told her, "Victoria, you are so good, someday you will go to heaven with your shoes on." Then Victoria met an American soldier, a Lutheran, who helped her understand that we are not saved by our works but by what Christ has done for us.

Jesus does not dismiss this man or ignore him for this foolish question. The gospel of Mark says, "Jesus loved him." He loved him enough to show him where he was wrong. Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good- except God alone." This man thinks he is a good man and he believes Jesus is a good teacher, but he does not understand just how good God is. Only God is truly good, perfect and holy. If we measure ourselves by how others live we might be able to say, "I am doing quite well in how I live my life, compared to some people I know." But if we measure our lives to how good God is, namely perfect, then we have to admit that we fall far short of his glory and his perfection. Jesus wants this man to realize it is impossible for him to save himself.

Jesus says to him, "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'" Before Jesus can even say anything more this man proudly boasts of his performances. "All these I have kept since I was a boy." Oh, I am sure that he could say "I have never had relations with a woman who was not my wife." I am sure he could say, "I have never murdered another person." I am sure he could say, "I have never stolen money from another person." I am sure he could say, "I have never lied in a court of law." But what about that commandment that calls on us to honor and respect our parents? His selective memory allows him to gloss over those times he caused his parents grief by fighting with a brother or sister.

My dear mother, one of the most honest persons I have ever known, once told my wife, that we hardly ever fought when we were children. Didn't she remember the time when she had to chase us out of the house because we would not stop fighting? I can say that I have never murdered another person, but breaking the fifth commandment includes much more than murder. It includes anger, hatred, harsh words, even the failure to love and care for people as we should. If giving false witness means only not lying in a court of law, then I have done quite well. However, if it includes using words to make ourselves look better in the eyes of others than we really, then we all have to admit to not being as honest as God who is good wants us to be.

Jesus knows exactly what to say to this person to help him see that it is utterly impossible for him to be good enough for God. "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." If this man could have lived a perfect life then he could have had the treasures of heaven. You can see how far he is from having his goodness measure up to God's goodness. "When he heard this he became very sad because he was a man of great wealth." Here was a man who could proudly boast about loving God with his whole heart, soul, and mind. But when Jesus challenged him to give up his money, he flies his true colors. His money was more important to him than God. He couldn't even keep the first commandment that says, "You shall have no other gods."

So you enter into a contest that offers five million dollars as the top prize. You fanaticize what you would do with that money. Perhaps you even plan seriously to keep only a small amount for yourself. The rest you plan to give away. Deep down in your heart of hearts you sincerely believe that you are more deserving of that money than someone else who entered that contest. God is good. God is perfect. God is holy. By contrast we fall short of his glory. That is what sin is. We fall short and it is utterly impossible for us to make up the wrong with have done because it will only add more sin to what has already been committed. Google the national debt and be shocked at how fast the debt is growing. So the debt of sin grows each day in each of us. Jesus wants us to know there is nothing we can do to solve this problem because it is an impossible situation.

Eternal life is only possible with God

That brings us to the next point of our sermon. Eternal life is only possible with God. "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed it is easier for camel to go through the eye of a needle than for our a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus could have said the same thing about the poor person. "How hard it is for a poor person to enter the kingdom of God!" Who thinks too much about money, the poor or the rich?

You might even say, "How hard it is for a child to enter the kingdom of God?" because children will display anger and selfishness that makes it blatantly obvious how far they are from measuring up to God who is good.

Let's spend some time talking about this camel going through the eye of the needle. There are some who suggest Jesus is speaking about a small narrow gate called the eye of the needle that was in the walls of Jerusalem. This supposed eye of the needle could be opened up at night when the main gates were closed. The camels had to be unloaded and then stoop down to get into the gate. Those who push this interpretation say that as the camel has the baggage removed from it back and stoops low, so we need to get rid of some of our riches and humble ourselves before God to have eternal. This interpretation appeals to people because it points to something you can do to inherit eternal life.

The context is so important. Jesus is making the point that it is impossible for us to enter into the kingdom of God if we love our riches more than God, ourselves more than God, or anytime we fail to put the Lord first in our lives. The people are so taken back by what Jesus says they ask "Who then can be saved?" You know the answer. No one can be saved. Romans 3 says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

But then Jesus gives us hope with these simple words, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." The Bible is an amazing book because it leads us to believe in things that are humanly impossible. It leads us to believe in miracles. The Christian faith is built on belief in miracles. We believe that our God made the heavens and the earth with the power of his Word. We believe that Jesus God's Son was conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. When Mary asked the angel how all these things could happen, the angel said, "All things are possible with God." We believe that Jesus performed mighty miracles. They are recorded for us to strengthen our faith in him. John 20 says, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Our God did the impossible when he placed everything you ever did wrong, every careless word you ever spoke, every selfish thought you ever had, every failure to love people as you should, every sin was placed on Jesus. Jesus performed a miracle by suffering for our sin in our place so that every sin could be paid for and he could tell us from the cross, "It is finished!" Our heavenly Father performed a miracle by raising Jesus from the dead to assure you he has accepted what his Son has done for us. Jesus also raise himself from the dead. That means he will also someday raise us from the dead and give us eternal life with him. We believe there will someday be a new heaven and new earth, free from all pain and suffering including the political ads we see on television. "What is impossible with men is possible with God." What must I do to inherit eternal life? "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me." Amen.