

What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life? (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁸ And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹ And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²³ But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. ²⁴ Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” ²⁸ And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” ²⁹ And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰ who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

³¹ And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” ³⁴ But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:18–34)

Attachments of the Heart

- A. While the issue of money and riches features large in this text—and we’re invited to see the potential danger of them and things—the deeper, more fundamental issue that Christ is addressing here has to do with what I might call the attachments of the heart.
 - 1. In this sense, then, what this text brings out for us is not all that different from that which we looked at together last week as we considered that old Christmas hymn *Joy to the World* and reflected on the idea of preparing room for Jesus in our hearts.
 - a. The question being brought out in our text this morning is: What are we hoping in? What are we trusting in? What are we loving above all else?
- B. In the case of this rich ruler here it is clearly money that has his heart. But in yours and my case it may be something different. And that is the issue at bottom for Jesus.
 - 1. Whatever else our hearts may be attached to, God wants it to be Him and Him alone in the deepest sense.

The Jealousy of God

- A. God is, as the old theologians weren't afraid to say, a jealous God. Indeed, God has said as much Himself: "I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Ex 20:5).
1. His jealousy is one of His attributes. It's one of His many perfections. It's an aspect of His glory.
- B. But, of course we are certainly prone to misconstrue this notion of Him. We think it makes Him rather insecure or something like this.
1. Whenever we are jealous it is because we want what another has and it irritates us to no end that they should have it and we don't. We think of that high school boy seething at home while the girl he's been crushing on is out at homecoming dance with the varsity quarterback or whatever.
 - a. Jealousy, for us, is not a mark of strength or confidence. It is not something to be admired or praised. It is something a bit pathetic. It is a mark of shame.
- C. But, you see, for God it is something quite different. God is not jealous for our hearts, for our affection, because He is needy or insecure. Quite the opposite really. He is jealous for us because He loves us and He knows that if something other than Himself is sitting upon the throne of our hearts it will be that very thing that elicits our demise.
1. When we spiral off from Him, we spiral off away from the realm of life towards the realm of death. In other words then: God wants our hearts for Himself because He wants what's best for us . . . for you!
- D. This is what we shall see play out in our text this morning. I'll organize our journey through these verses under four headings: (1) Reframing the Discussion (vv. 18-21); (2) Reaching the Heart (vv. 22-23); (3) Respecting the Problem (vv. 24-25); and (4) Realizing the Solution (vv. 26-34).
1. We'll look at the first two this week and we'll come back for the last two next time.

(1) Reframing the Discussion (vv. 18-21)

A Ruler and His Question

- A. As we come to begin here in v. 18 we meet a man identified as a "ruler".
1. What this means is not entirely clear, and commentators go different directions with it. But one thing is certain: he seems to be a man of notable pedigree and achievement and wealth.
 - a. He is the sort of man that you and I, perhaps, would strive to be like.

B. And he approaches Jesus here with a seemingly honest and respectable question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 18). It is a good question. And one which we would do well to consider along with him.

1. Indeed, in the end we shall find that Jesus does come out with an answer for this man and for us—though it is not in the least what we may have otherwise expected.

C. Jesus senses already at the start the sort of legalistic, superficial framework this man is working within, and He will, as I’ve said, here attempt to reframe the discussion in order to clear that up.

“Good Teacher”

A. Jesus’ first attempt to reframe things is there in v. 19: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.’”

B. Now, at first this statement is a bit puzzling isn’t it?

1. I mean, after all, we just got done celebrating the glorious mystery of the incarnation at Christmas where we hold that God Himself—the Son of God to be precise, the second person of the holy Trinity, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father—this God took on flesh and came into time and space on a rescue mission to save sinners like you and me.

2. But now, here we read that this Jesus, is pushing back on the ruler’s reference to Him even as “Good Teacher” with the objection that “No one is good except God alone.” What are we to make of that?!

a. Well, certainly some have looked at this and concluded: “You see, Jesus is not God. He is a mere man like the rest of us.”

b. But that is not what Jesus is saying. Technically, if you look closely, Jesus is not saying that He is not God, He is simply saying that only God is good. He is pushing back on the mistaken notion this ruler has that any mere man in and of himself can be good in some fundamental way. He is not so much here saying that He Himself is not good as much as He is saying that men in themselves can never be.

i. God has not changed his opinion about man in his now natural fallen state. What he said of us back in Noah’s day is still true of us today: “[E]very intention of the thoughts of his heart [is] only evil continually” (Gen 6:5).

(1) O sure they may move the evil into a religious context where they look good and clean on the outside, but as you press in a bit and stir up the water, the same muck comes out in the end.

C. We like to think ourselves decent enough—and when comparing with other human beings we may indeed be so.

1. But when once we truly see ourselves in contrast with God—His holiness, His righteousness, His purity, His splendor—well we are at once left to cry out with Peter when he caught even

a slight glimpse of the Savior's glory: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

a. We know at once that God alone is good and we are not—not by a long shot!

D. So Jesus is going to try to move this man, and us, in that direction.

"What Must I Do?"

A. But He takes it a step further. This man, if you noticed, asked what he must "do" to inherit eternal life. There again, we see the hints that he is off from the start.

1. He is like a man stepping up for a race on the wrong side of the line. When the gun fires he may sprint off with all energy and zeal . . . but he is heading the wrong way around the track. However much effort he exerts, he is only getting further behind.

a. His religion is an external list of do's and don'ts and his concern is to uphold them, prove himself to be good, and then inherit life.

i. But he's missed it. The economy of God's kingdom is not first works and then grace as it were. But grace and, only then, works—works that follow from a heart changed by God, melted down with love for Him and neighbor.

B. Now, on the surface, at first at least, Jesus seems to be bending to this man's line of questioning, does He not? This man asks for something to do, so Jesus seems to be giving him something to do.

1. He goes on to quote from the Ten Commandments, focusing in on the second table of the law—that which deals with love for neighbor in particular: "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother'" (v. 20).

C. But, upon closer evaluation, we shall see that even here He is attempting to reframe the discussion and bring this man back onto proper footing. As with the pushback above, there is an undercurrent here, an undertow we could say, intended by Jesus to draw the man down deeper beneath the surface of things into the realm of the heart.

1. The law, the commandments, as you may well remember, were never intended to be a mere external set of rules by which we justify ourselves or not. No! They were intended rather to lead us to Christ for mercy and forgiveness and the gift of His righteousness. They were intended to expose not our own moral excellence but our own depravity.

a. Certainly, the end goal is that we come fulfill the law, but in the last analysis it will not be something we have done in our own strength, but something, rather, that God has done in and through us by way of the strength and Spirit of Christ.

D. But this man continues to miss Jesus' drift. Christ first invited him to think upon the goodness of God that he might be alerted to his own sinfulness. And here Christ invites him to think upon the perfect law of God that he might see how far short he falls.

1. But still the man remains stuck on the surface: “And he said, ‘All these I have kept from my youth’” (v. 21). In other words: “It seems I’ve got it handled Jesus. I always thought I was good and on the way to eternal life, and you’ve just confirmed it for me. Thanks!”
- E. It may well be that some of us are in that place here this morning. We are trusting that we are good enough—we are thinking that we are right with God because we do and don’t do a few things here or there.
1. Listen, true religion, true salvation, is so much deeper. And that is why Jesus will now get even more direct with this man and us in the next set of verses.

(2) Reaching the Heart (vv. 22-23)

“One Thing You Still Lack”

- A. Look now at v. 22: “When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’”
1. I love how Jesus almost nonchalantly mentions in response here, “O well and good, you’ve kept all those commandments have you? Well, let’s just take care of one more thing and you shall be ready for eternal life.” “O great,” we imagine the ruler responding, “What is it? Anything I’ll do it.” “Sell everything you have and give it away and come along with Me.”
- C. You see what Jesus is doing, don’t you?
1. He’s not giving this man another thing to do, another rule to obey, another rung in the ladder to climb, and then salvation. On the surface it may seem so, but that is not it.
 2. In fact, He is here cutting to the chase. He is reaching through the surface now and touching this man’s heart. He is exposing with this single command, this “one thing,” that everything in this brother is off—that God does not have his heart, but money does.
 - a. And, therefore, whatever else he’s doing or not doing on the surface of things is not being done rightly because it not being done in genuine love for God, nor for others for that matter.

Luther’s Larger Catechism

- A. Here we come to face what Martin Luther observed so many centuries ago in his [Larger Catechism](#). He outlines there the Ten Commandments and discusses in detail the connection between them all.
1. In particular, he shows how the first commandment is really the lynchpin, the hinge, the gateway into all the others. If you get it right, all the others come with it. If you get it wrong, all the others go awry as well.
- B. The first commandment, you may recall, is simply and profoundly this: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3).

1. This commandment comes from the first table of the law, and I find it interesting that Jesus didn't quote this on his list to the man at first. But, in any case, he is backing in towards it now with full force.
- C. Let me read to you a bit from Luther now: "A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.
- The purpose of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, and these fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. The meaning is: 'See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never seek another.' In other words: 'Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, come and cling to me. I am the one who will satisfy you and help you out of every need. Only let your heart cling to no one else.'"
- He goes on later to say: "[T]he first and chief commandment, [is the one] from which all the others proceed. This word, 'You shall have no other gods,' means simply, 'You shall fear, love, and trust me as your one true God.' Wherever a man's heart has such an attitude toward God, he has fulfilled this commandment and all the others. On the one hand, whoever fears and loves anything else in heaven and on earth will keep neither this nor any other."
- D. Let me work this out for you momentarily. Consider this rich ruler.
1. If God is truly his God—the One Whom he loves, trusts, delights in, and so forth—then even if money goes, even if the stock market plunges or the burglar hits up his house or whatever . . . he still has God as his hope and stay. God is still sitting on the throne of his heart. He still trusts God can and will work good for him in this and will care for him.
 - a. Therefore, he is still able to move on in those commandments genuinely, and love his neighbor—by not lying, stealing, murdering and resorting to self-protection and things. But instead he'll still be able to give generously in compassion for others.
 2. But if God is not truly his God, if money and wealth is his god—if that is what he loves, trusts, delights in, and so forth—well, then if the market plunges or the burglar runs off with it, this man's whole foundation has just been pulled out from under him. O sure he could be a decent human being, a pretty good and "generous" Jew when he had stuff, but now that he has nothing, something of an animal comes out.
 - a. He is a desperate man. And he will do desperate things to get what he needs and wants—he may even lie, steal, or kill. Because he didn't truly have the first commandment right, he never truly had all the others right either.

He Became Very Sad

- A. And this is what becomes plain in the verse that follows: "But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich" (v. 23).

1. “If you are forcing me to choose between God and money, if I can’t have both, well I suppose I’ll have to get by without God then because Lord knows I couldn’t live without my money.”
- B. Here we have a foretaste of the demise I spoke of at the first—how that idol which we set upon the throne of our hearts will ultimately be the thing that undoes us.
1. Note the correlation between extreme riches and extreme sadness here. That which we think will lead us to joy leads us to the place of sorrow . . . in the end.
- C. The word translated “**very sad**” [Gk. *perilupos*] here is a strong word. It only appears a few times in the NT and two of those occur when Jesus Himself is discussing His own personal agony in Gethsemane.
1. Do you remember what He said as He trembled there in the dark, contemplating the cross that He would soon have to bear? “**My soul is very sorrowful** [Gk. *perilupos*], **even to death** . . .” (Matt 26:38).
- D. The sorrow of this word, then, is one of deep grieving, almost as one would at a funeral.
1. You see, for this ruler, as he considered what it would mean to let go of his wealth, it felt like death to him. When you attach your heart so intently to something, when that thing goes you feel like your life goes with it.
 - a. You remember, perhaps, the example I gave last time from the movie *The Company Men* with that guy who lost his job. “**My life ended**,” he said. He had so attached, so interwoven his very life and identity into this job that when it was gone, he was gone.
 - i. That’s why these things end up destroying us in the end. They don’t go on, they don’t last. And what becomes of us then?

And Jesus, Looking at Him, Loved Him

- A. Let me end with this. There is an interesting note made in Mark’s account of this same incident that I thought would prove significant at this point.
1. You see, we might be inclined to think that Jesus is being rather harsh with this poor ruler. He is demanding quite a bit. The jealousy of God, as it were, seems a bit ruthless and rigid and callous and upsetting.
- B. But Mark will not let us make that mistake. After hearing the young man say he’s kept the commandments this is how he describes Jesus’ response: “**And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’**” (Mark 10:21).

1. The call to sell all and follow Him is the call of love. Because He so loves this man, He wants to address what this man so loves. It's a severe mercy.
 - a. He knows money will undo this brother in the end. He knows that the only way this poor man will truly find satisfaction in this world and inherit eternal life in the world to come is if he comes to know Jesus as His Lord, Savior, and Treasure.

- C. You do notice, don't you, that His goal isn't to leave this man empty-handed. His goal is to give this man more of Himself.
 1. It is not: "Sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and go on your way." No! It is: "Sell all that you have, give it to the poor, *"and come, follow me"* (v. 22). It is the great *"me"* of Jesus Christ that He is offering this man here.

- D. Jesus never asks us to give up anything without also promising to give us more of Himself. We'll see this play out even further next week. But it's a principle we must get settled in our hearts.
 1. As one commentator has put it: *"[God is] not only more demanding than people [care] to think, but also more generous than they [dare] to hope"* (Richardson).
 - a. He scars us to save us. He breaks us to build us. He wounds us to heal us. As men cast overboard we cling to our idols as if they are lifesavers but the Lord knows they are only stones and we'll sink along with them if He doesn't rip them from our hands and our hearts.

- E. I was reading something this past week that captured this idea perfectly. And I wanted to read it to you here because I am sure the Lord is doing this to you now in some way.
 1. There are dreams, hopes, longings that He's not giving for some reason. Or maybe you had them but only for a moment, just to have Him rip them away from you. And you are left wondering: "Why?! Why Lord?! What are you doing with this?"
 - a. Well, I'll tell you what He is doing with this, in one way or another. He is saving you. He is drawing you near. He is doing the same sort of thing He was attempting to do with this ruler here. Don't fight it. Learn to trust Him in the place of pain and loss.

- F. This comes from Ray Ortlund, but he begins by quoting A.W. Tozer: *"A.W. Tozer wisely said, 'It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.' At some point in your life, God will injure you so extremely that the self-reliance you aren't even aware of, the self-reliance with which you've been navigating so consistently by that it feels natural and innocent, will collapse under the loss and anguish. You will start realizing, 'Oh, so this is what it means to trust the Lord. I need him now with an urgency, a desperation, a seriousness of purpose deeper than ever before.' And then God will come through for you. And you will emerge from that suffering a deeper saint."*
 1. In other words: His goal is not to take more from you but to give more to you. He is looking at you, and He loves you. He wants your heart attached to Him because He knows He will never fail you.

- a. Wealth, riches, the things of this world, they come and they go.
 - b. But Jesus, He dies for our sin on that cross and then He rises to live forevermore.
- G. This is why He tells His disciples in [John 16:22](#): “[Y]ou have sorrow now [because I’m going to die], but I will see you again [because I’m going to rise], and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” Because your hearts are attached to Me!