

What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life? (Part 2)

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)

When Winning Is Losing

- A. I saw an article a couple weeks back now in the Washington Post. Admittedly, it’s a bit humorous from our perspective, though I know for the lady involved—not so much.
1. But I guess, every Christmas, Spain has a big old lottery draw that they call El Gordo—the fat one. Supposedly, it’s the biggest draw in the world, boasting of about 2.43 billion dollars in prizes.
 2. And this reporter was covering the whole event, and as things transpire, she suddenly realizes that she herself actually has winning numbers.
 3. And so she starts just freaking out and celebrating. There’s others in the crowd who had some winning numbers as well. And they’re all just going crazy. They’re dancing all over the place. Champagne is flying. This reporter runs up and kisses the woman at the store there who sold her the ticket.
 4. She looks at the camera and wags her finger in front of it: “I’m not going in tomorrow. Natalia doesn’t work tomorrow!”
 - a. This led some to think that she was actually quitting her job right there on the spot. So the title of the article: “Reporter Won Lottery and Seemed to Quit Job on Air.” She wins the lottery. She’s done. She’s made it!

- B. But then, sometime later in the day, reality breaks in on the party.
 - 1. Now, I guess with the way they divide up the winnings and things, there are some complications that this reporter didn't fully realize at the time. You can win various amounts of the prize depending on the kind of ticket you buy.
 - 2. Well, Natalia probably thought she was set to receive something like \$444,000 but it turns out she only had claim to about \$5500. Hardly enough to live on if you just quit your job.
 - a. It's still a good day, right, just not as good as you thought. But, I suppose, depending on the sort of hot water she got in with her employer over this, it may end up being somewhat of a bad day. In fact, she ended up having to apologize for her behavior, and last I saw it was unclear whether she'd still had her job or not.

Because He Loves

- A. Now, you're probably wondering why in the world I'm sharing this up front like this. Well, I share it because this is the sort of embarrassment, the sort of tragedy, (if I could amplify it a bit) the sort of devastation that Jesus, in our text here this morning, is trying to save us from.
- B. You see we all are, on analogy, quite similar to this reporter.
 - 1. When we come into wealth, when our numbers are drawn as it were, when the lottery has finally turned in our favor, well, we think it something we can live off just fine. We think it will be a satisfying, a lasting, a significant thing that shall protect and preserve and fulfill us.
 - a. We think we can check out of any dependency upon or responsibility before God. We don't need him. We don't have to pay Him any mind at all. We've got more than enough on our own now. We are dancing, and high-fiving, and popping off the champagne, and what not. We are feeling quite good about ourselves.
- C. And yet, Jesus is here in our text saying: "It's not what you think it is. It's not going to do it for you. It will let you down in the end."
 - 1. As with this reporter, so too with us. At the end of the day, however rich we may think we are, we come to find it is simply never enough. We are always a bit unfulfilled by it. We come away with the sense that we've been hoodwinked, lied to, and so forth. We thought at last we'd finally arrived and we come to realize perhaps we've only gotten ourselves lost further in the weeds.
- D. Now, you may recall, this is part two of what I began last week. And I concluded last time, with something Mark brings out in his account of this story. And I think it's relevant to the point I'm making here as we attempt to get back in.
 - 1. In Mark's gospel, he goes out of his way to make sure we understand that Jesus says all that He does here to this rich ruler about selling his things and what not, not because He is trying to be unnecessarily rigid or harsh or cruel, even, but because "looking at him, [He] loved him" (Mark 10:21).

- a. It is because he loves this young man that he calls him to detach from such an impotent idol as wealth and invites him rather to attach his heart to Himself—the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world.
 - i. In Christ is found true security and treasure and provision and life. He will not let us down as all other things inevitably will.

The Attachments of the Heart

- A. So this text, as we said last time, is about, more broadly, the idea of the attachments of the heart—the things we set on the throne of our hearts, the things we functionally make our god as we hope in them, trust in them, try to find our identity, life, and joy in them.
 - 1. More narrowly though, and for this man in particular, we see this text is about the dangers of wealth and how tempting it shall be for us to attach our hearts to it.
- B. That is what is happening here with this man. On the surface, he seems to be keeping God’s law well enough, but on the inside it is money that has captivated him and he can’t let it go.
- C. I said last time that I am going to 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. In part one we looked at the first two. This morning we shall tackle three and four.

(3) Respecting the Problem (vv. 24-25)

How Difficult It Is!

- A. With this third heading, we are preparing to drop in at v. 24. Remember that this young man began back up in v. 18 with a good question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”
 - 1. The man clearly thought himself to be well on his way towards it and yet when Jesus touches that which is truly his god—his riches—the man is unable to part. The last we read of him is there in v. 23: “But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.”
 - a. And Matthew and Mark take it a step further for us in their accounts. This man didn’t just become very sad. He “went away” very sad (Matt 19:22; Mark 10:22). It was the end of the line for him. He couldn’t make the trade.
- B. So now, we pick back up in v. 24 and come to Jesus’ reaction to all of this: “Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, ‘How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’”
 - 1. If you’ve been with us for any time at all as we’ve been making our way through Luke’s gospel, surely such a statement no longer surprises you. It’s a point Jesus has been making with relative frequency.

- C. But here it seems to me Jesus goes on to give the biblical principle it's most pronounced expression: "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" (v. 25).
1. The camel would've been Palestine's largest land animal. The eye of a needle represents really the smallest possible opening.
 - a. It's not hard to gather what Jesus is saying here. He's saying that it is not only difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, it is impossible.
- D. Now, because of the sheer shock such a statement brings to our worldly sensibilities, many interpreters through the years have tried their best to water it down a bit, make it a little more palatable.
1. Some have claimed (though without evidence) that the "eye of the needle" was the name of a small gate that was narrow and small and a camel would have to shuffle its way through carefully.
 2. Others have said perhaps we've mistranslated the Greek, and instead of "camel" it should be "cable." It would be hard to get a cable through the eye of a needle. It still requires great care, but perhaps it can be done.
- E. Whichever way you slice it, these attempts to diminish the force, to soften the blow, as it were, miss Jesus' point. The point is not that it is only moderately difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The point is that it's ultimately impossible for them to do so.
1. And if you doubt me on this, all we have to do is drop our eyes down to v. 27 and you'll see that Jesus says as much Himself: "[Such a thing is] impossible with man," He says.
 - a. A rich man cannot get into heaven any more than a camel can suck its belly in and wriggle its way through the eye of a needle. It's not going to happen. That's the point.
- F. And we would do well to let the full weight of this statement rest on us a bit before trying to shrug it off. Such a thing would be especially important for us to consider here in Silicon Valley, right?
1. After all, when USA Today recently analyzed the census data from all major metro areas in the U.S. it concluded that the richest area in America is, no surprise, the very one we find ourselves in. So it's real here folks.
 - a. We live in a city crowded with camels. And as such it will be difficult for many here to enter the kingdom of God.

But Why?

- A. But why? What is it about wealth that makes entering the kingdom of God so difficult?
1. Well, to come straightaway at the answer, I think such a thing reassures our false sense of self-sufficiency. It numbs us to the reality of our utter dependency. It flatters us as if we

were adults—capable, prominent, able to stand on our own—when truly what we need most is to at last admit that we are as little children before God.

- a. All this to say, money and wealth, in many ways, lures us away from the very thing Jesus said we needed back up in [Luke 18:17](#): “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”
- B. The answer to this question, I suppose, is itself hinted at in the illustration Jesus uses with the camel and needle. After all, technically speaking, what is the issue there? Is it not this: that the camel is simply too big to fit through?
1. Ah, there is the reason I tell you, all the same, for why the wealthy man finds it too hard to enter the kingdom of God. He himself, as with the camel, is simply too big in his own eyes and estimation. He won’t dare stoop to such a place of humility. He is not a desperate man. He is not a beggar of sorts. He wouldn’t bring shame on himself by reaching out to another for help. And so the kingdom, for him, remains an impossibility.

(4) Realizing the Solution (vv. 26-34)

Five Observations

- A. This is quite a problem! So what’s the solution? For this we come now to [vv. 26-34](#) and I want to make five observations with regards to this solution as Jesus presents it here.

Observation #1: It Reverses Common Assumptions

- A. We might at first miss this, but it’s what nearly every commentator brings out in light of the way the disciples respond to Jesus’ statement there in [v. 26](#): “Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’”
1. Now, Luke is not as forceful as Matthew or Mark on this point. In Matthew it reads: “When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’” ([Matt 19:25](#)).
 - a. Jesus’ statement about the difficulty of the rich entering God’s kingdom has His disciples astonished. “Then I guess no one can be saved,” in essence, is their response.
- B. And here is where the reversal comes in. You see, for the Jew in this day, it was common assumption that riches and wealth were not marks of being far from the kingdom of God but indications that you were quite near and being blessed by Him. It was understood that those who fear the Lord shall prosper . . . physically, materially, immediately.
1. And therefore the rich were thought to have been not the furthest from the kingdom but the closest to it. That’s the reason for their astonishment. That’s the reason they’re thinking: “If not them, no one!”

- C. If we're honest we're still prone to this aren't we? God's blessing and favor equals material prosperity. When things are going well, God loves me. When things are going bad, God hates me.
 - 1. But the economy of the kingdom is not so simplistic.
 - a. Sometimes one of the most loving things God can do is break you and let things fall apart so you fall in on Him in new and deeper ways.
 - b. Likewise, sometimes one of the most wrathful things can do is hand you over to material prosperity and all the worldly objects you so desire so you just become so numb in it you're gone! You're no longer looking for God, you think you are a God. And He lets you go the way of your foolishness.
 - i. In other words: Sometimes God's favor looks like His frown, and sometimes God's frown looks like His favor.
- D. Sometimes, oftentimes even, the kingdom of God and the gospel reverses, confuses, even scandalizes common assumptions.
 - 1. Some of us today may feel as if we're right in the center of God's kingdom and He's trying to alert us to the fact that truly we're far from it.
 - 2. Others of us may feel as if God has been opposing us, as if God is out to get us, and yet He's here saying: "I am at work in the suffering, and I am well pleased with you my child!"

Observation #2: It Requires a Miracle of Sovereign Grace

- A. In v. 27 Jesus goes on to respond to His disciples' astonishment: "But he said, 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'"
- B. It is not possible for man in himself to resist the allure of material wealth and prosperity. Such things will always seem more significant to us than God or the cross or things like this.
 - 1. But what we cannot do in and of ourselves God can do for us by way of His sovereign grace. He and He alone can snap the attachments our hearts make with mammon.
- C. We are here brought to face again the important doctrine of the new birth.
 - 1. You remember, perhaps, what Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3); and then again in v. 5: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."
 - a. We will continue to see the things of this world, the kingdoms of this world, as more prominent, more important, more pressing, until the Spirit of God falls on us and we are born again from above. Only then will we see our great need for mercy and God's great provision in Christ. Only then will Christ be seen as a greater treasure than all this earth has to offer.

- D. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the same sort of language Jesus uses here in v. 27 is used elsewhere in the Scriptures to refer to God’s ability to bring forth children from barren wombs.
1. The angel, speaking to Mary about Elizabeth says: “³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:36–37).
 2. This last line itself is a direct quotation of Gen 18:14 in the Greek OT where God is speaking to Abraham concerning his intention to bring a son from the aged Sarah’s barren womb and He says this: “¹³ Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” (vv. 13–14).
 - a. All of these things Jesus is invoking here when He says: “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (v. 27). The stories of God bringing new life from dead wombs were themselves foreshadows, pictures of how the spiritual life truly begins, of the new birth we all need, the regeneration that must come for me from God or I shall not even be able to begin the Christian life.
- E. In the original language behind this verse, the word translated “possible” in the ESV is related to the Greek word *dunamis*—which, of course, is where we get our English word “dynamite”.
1. I love the image this provides. It’s as if God, in sovereign grace, slips dynamite into the hearts of fallen men, thereby breaking the attachments we have to money and stuff. He blows up, as it were, the internal composition of our hearts and begins to rebuild them aright.
 - a. Suddenly, we find ourselves no longer in love with wealth, no longer beholden to it. O sure we still need it in some sense, but not like we need God. We are able to release it in love for God and neighbor, to use it for the advancement of His kingdom, not our own, in the world.
 - i. We are able to fulfill what Paul points us towards in 1 Tim 6:17: “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”

Observation #3: It Loosens Our Grip on Earthly Things

- A. And this leads to Observation #3, that this solution loosens our grip on earthly things.
1. Peter, perhaps recognizing that the Lord has done the impossible in him, speaks up: “See, we have left our homes and followed you” (v. 28). Grace has been at work.
- B. But I should say a word about what Jesus means when he mentions there in v. 29 that we are leaving not just a house or stuff but “wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God . . .” What does He mean by that?!

1. Suffice it to say He is not here calling us to forsake our familial ties and responsibilities. He is not here with these few words undermining the whole of biblical teaching on the subject that directs us to the contrary.
 - a. He is rather talking about the deepest attachments of the heart, our fundamental loyalties. He is probing us there and saying: “Listen, I have to be it for you. ‘Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:27).” That is what He is getting at here.
- C. To illustrate what I mean, one could imagine a scenario where one spouse is threatening to divorce if the other doesn’t renounce faith in Jesus. “I’m sick of this. You’re such a prude. You make me feel guilty for the things I want to do. You are always going on about church and the mission of God. I’ve had enough. I don’t believe it. I won’t believe it. It’s time you choose. This imaginary Jesus fellow. Or the husband of your youth, standing right here in front of you.”
 1. What do you do? Paul says in [1 Cor 7](#) that there will be people who come to Christ who later will be abandoned by their spouses because of it. Would you be able to let him/her go for the sake of Christ, His kingdom, eternal life? That’s the question on the table here.

Observation #4: It Brings Greater Blessing Then and Now

- A. Look at what Jesus says in full there in [vv. 29-30](#): “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.’”
- B. Let your mind settle on that phrase “in this time” for a moment—“who will not receive many times more in this time” (v. 30a).
 1. So often we speak of the Christian life as if it were merely a biding of our time until heaven—a getting through the slog of this life until finally we get our fullness of the life hereafter.
 - a. To be sure, certainly, there is a sense in which we are longing for the age to come and the riches in glory that await us there, but that is not to say that there is nothing of that future to be enjoyed now in the present. Indeed there is.
- C. “I came that they may have life [Jesus says] and have it abundantly” ([John 10:10](#)). And this life doesn’t start off there somewhere after death, it starts right now.
 1. In [Phil 1:21](#), Paul does not say: “To live is loss, and to die is gain.” He says: “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” And therein lies the great difference. We are not left empty here and now. We are filled with Christ . . . “in this time”!
 - a. O sure, we may lose our house for the sake of God’s kingdom, but in Christ we come to find our refuge, our place of welcome, our true home.
 - b. O sure, we may lose our spouse for the sake of God’s kingdom, but in Christ we discover we have a perfect, kind, compassionate, loving Bridegroom.

- c. O sure, we may lose our parents for the sake of God’s kingdom, but in Christ we receive God as our eternal and heavenly Father.
 - d. O sure, we may lose brothers or sisters or children for the sake of God’s kingdom, but in Christ we enter into a spiritual family, brothers and sisters and children in the Lord, here and now, and always forever, in the church!
- D. Make no mistake. The Christian life is not loss and then gain, brothers and sisters. It is gain upon gain—however much we lose in this life for His sake. May we never forget it!

Observation #5: It Is All Owing to the Cross of Our Lord

- A. We come now to [vv. 31-34](#) where Jesus foretells for yet another time that He is headed for the cross, to be delivered over to the Gentiles, to be mocked, shamefully treated, spit upon, flogged, and killed, and on the third day rise.
- 1. I decided to include these verses within the scope of this sermon because here really is the key to it all. It’s the cross of Christ that really holds all that we’ve been talking about here together. It’s what He does there at Calvary that makes this solution possible in the first place.
- B. It may help to revisit that image of dynamite for a moment here as we close.
- 1. You see, in order to snap the attachments of heart we’ve made with the stuff of this world, in order to explode the misplaced affections and put things back in order aright, in order to free us from the devil’s enchantment, the Son of God would have to come down on a rescue mission, where He’d dive deep into the dark and twisted nature of humanity, and set the dynamite in place there.
- C. So that’s what He does. He takes on humanity, He takes on flesh. And though He alone is good, He’s treated as wicked. Though He alone left all else for the sake of the kingdom of God, He’s treated as an idolater. Though He is the Author of life, abundant life, He is given over to death.
- 1. And then, somewhere deep within the belly of the earth, somewhere deep within the mixed up nature of man, as it were, on the third day, at dawn . . . the dynamite goes off!
 - a. The Son rises—our salvation, our eternal life inheritance, in His hands, to be freely, lavishly distributed to His beloved by sovereign grace.
- D. If Jesus is more precious to you this morning than money, God did that, and you owe it to the work of Christ on the cross there at Calvary for you.