

What Must I Do To Inherit Eternal Life?

Mark 10:17-31

Introduction: 1) Who am I? Why am I here? How do I live the good life? What is my purpose in living? Where will I go when I die? These are what we sometimes refer to as the “ultimate questions” of life. Everyone asks them. Everyone thinks about them. Why? Because these questions go to the very heart of what it means to be human. They address our significance, importance and destiny. And think about this: The questions do connect. How you answer one will influence how you answer the others.

2) One day a fine and respected man of the community came to Jesus. He was interested specifically in the question concerning destiny. He framed the question this way: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In the process of answering that question, Jesus also gave him insight concerning what or who really matters most in life. And, what you decide now will determine where you go later. The questions connect and so do the answers.

3) This text addresses the important question, *who or what should have priority in my life?* We will explore the basic biblical truth that *Jesus demands that people give him priority in their lives* above all else and all others (Col. 1:18). He is to be first. He is to have the preeminence.

4) Let’s go back and consider the biblical setting. John Mark wrote the 2nd gospel c. AD 65-68, making great use of an eyewitness the Apostle Peter. He wrote to a Roman audience facing severe trials and persecution during the reign of Emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68). He challenges them concerning true discipleship in Mark 8:31-10:52. This is a unified section that contains 3 passion predictions of Jesus (8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34), each followed by instruction on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus says we must receive the kingdom of God like

a little, helpless child. The account of the “rich young ruler” raises the question: will someone with great wealth and standing receive the kingdom like a little child?

5) Reading the parallel accounts of this story in Matthew 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30 is quite helpful in constructing a composite description of the man who came to Jesus. We will draw from these texts in our study.

Transition: So, what must I do or, better, what must I understand to inherit eternal life?

I. It is easier than you think. 10:17-22

Jesus was continuing his journey towards Jerusalem and his passion. Mark 11-16 records the last week of our Lord’s public ministry. The disciples are with Him and our Savior is engaging them in teaching about true discipleship and his forthcoming crucifixion and resurrection. A cursory reading of Mark 8:31-10:52 reveals they are struggling students who can’t quite grasp what he is saying. The verses immediately preceding our text are crucial to our understanding of this event. Jesus has told them those who enter the kingdom of God must be like a little child (10:13-16). All must come to Jesus with nothing, as a trusting and helpless child in total dependence on Him. No one can earn the kingdom, a theme which dominates verse 13-31 and also verses 35-45. The requirement is the same for all. Simple child-like reliance on Jesus is how one inherits eternal life. It is that easy. It is in the context of this teaching that one who is the very opposite and antithesis of a helpless child approaches Jesus.

1) Go to the right person. 10:17

- A man ran up to him [Jesus]. Verse 22 informs us he had great wealth (“possessions”). Luke 18:18 calls him a ruler. Matthew 19:22 says he is young. Putting all of this together we have popularly referred to him as the “the rich,

young ruler.” He was a “mover and shaker” in that day. He was certainly well known, a man of power, affluence and influence. Evidently he had heard Jesus teach and was impressed with what he heard. He did not walk to Jesus, he ran to Him. He was eager to get to Jesus because Jesus “was setting out on His journey.” Perhaps he would not have another opportunity to talk to this man whose teachings were unlike any he had ever heard before. With incredible respect and honor he “knelt before him.” He saw Jesus as a distinguished rabbi, and paid him homage reserved for the great teachers of the law. He certainly had come in the right way (humility) and to the right person (Jesus).

- And, Jesus will readily identify with the rich, young ruler. After all, He was about 30 years of age Himself. And, He too, was a rich, young ruler! In fact He was far more rich than this man was or could possibly imagine. As the Son of God, Jesus had lived for all of eternity in the glory, wealth, love and sweet fellowship of His Father. What He was about to ask this man to do was not unfamiliar to Him! He had already left it all behind. Paul says it perfectly in 2 Cor. 8:8-9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

“And [Jesus would say] I am going into a poverty deeper than anyone has ever known ... I am giving it all away. Why? For you. Now, [get ready, I am going to ask] you [to] give away everything to follow me. If I gave away my “big all” to get you, can you give away your “little all” to follow me? I won’t ask you to do anything I haven’t already done. I’m the ultimate Rich Young Ruler who has given

away the ultimate wealth to get you. Now, you need to give away yours to get me”.

(Tim Keller, *King's Cross*, 136). Jesus is the right person.

2) Ask the right questions.

10:17

- This man then did something that is virtually without parallel in the Judaism of the day. He calls Jesus good. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This was an incredible statement and tribute as to the impression Jesus had made on him. Jew referred to God as good, but never spoke this way of one another except in a derivative or qualified sense (see Prov. 12:2; 14:14; Eccles. 9:2; Matt. 12:35). Only God is characteristically good, good in the absolute sense of the word. Jesus’ response in verse 18 will bear this out. Still, the rich young ruler was awed by Jesus and he had an extremely important question to ask Him. This question is also without parallel in the gospels, and one of the most significant in all of the Bible and for all humanity: “how do I get eternal life?” In the Bible the gift of the very life of God is called 1) eternal life (10:17), 2) entering the kingdom of God (10:23, 25), 3) having treasure in heaven (10:21), and 4) enjoying the age to come (10:30). It is the life of God and life with God. It is the privilege of being a member of God’s kingdom and it must be received with the faith and reliance of a little child in Jesus. We do not know whether the young ruler had heard Jesus say this or not. His question, though by no means a bad one, implies he believes eternal life is something you earn, something you work for. What must I do ... Tim Keller is right. All religions of the world can be categorized under one of two words: 1) do or 2) done. I am saved and receive eternal life by what I do or by what another has done. Christianity is a done religion/relationship. Eternal life is

not achieved, it is received as a gift (John 1:12) based upon what Jesus has done for us (John 3:16). The young ruler must have both a change of theology as well as a change of heart if he is to inherit eternal life.

3) Get the right answers.

10:18-22

- Jesus answers the young ruler's question with a question and does a little theology in the process: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Jesus does not respond in kind to the extravagant praise of the young man. Actually His response would have put this young ruler a bit on the defensive. Jesus puts the focus of the issue where it must be: on God and God alone who is the source and essence of goodness. The young man's starting point was wrong because it was himself. "What must I do ..." Jesus directs him to look not to himself but to God first and foremost. Any talk of eternal life should begin here. The rich young ruler was no doubt a "good man" by the standards of his day. He saw in Jesus another good man whose insight into spiritual matters could perhaps solve some lingering doubts and questions which obviously plagued his soul. Jesus forces him to look to God for any hope of genuine goodness and eternal life. Furthermore, the way in which Jesus gave His answer at least implicitly confronts the young ruler with his evaluation of Jesus. To call Him good is to call Him God. Is that what you mean? If Jesus is not God, then he, like the rest of humanity, is a sinner and therefore not good in the supreme sense. On the other hand, if he is God, it would be appropriate to call Him good. It would also be appropriate to worship Him, follow Him and obey Him. He challenges the young ruler to think clearly and choose his words carefully, a challenge each one of us should accept.

- Jesus does not wait for a response but moves the conversation forward in verse 19. “You know the commandments.” *The 10 Commandments* are found both in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Jesus cites the last 6 which address our human relationships with one another. “Do not defraud” may be a rewording or application of the last commandment against covetousness, or even be an application of commandments 8 and 9. The reason the commandments addressing our relationship to God are omitted will appear shortly. The young ruler wanted to know what must I do to inherit eternal life. Jesus says, I’ll tell you what you must do: keep and obey the will of God which is revealed in His perfect, holy and moral law. Obey this in the good sense (perfect) in which God is good and eternal life is yours.
- The young man impulsively responds in verse 20 with what was certainly an honest and heartfelt answer from his perspective: “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” From the age of 12 the young man had conducted his life according to the law of God. He had honored it and obeyed it. All of it! In an external sense what he said was probably true. Like the apostle Paul he was faultless (Phil. 3:6) with respect to the outward demands of the Law as taught by the religious teachers of Israel. From his *Bar Mitzvah* to this day, he had worked for God’s approval by keeping His commandments, and his record was spotless! Verse 21 is one of the most touching and tender verses in the Bible. Verse 22 is one of the most tragic. “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (v. 21). There was a sincerity and earnestness about this young man that moved the heart of our Lord. He looked at him intently with his piercing eyes. His divine heart of love reached

out because this man made in His image was so very near to the kingdom. Jesus then said, “You lack one thing: go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (v. 21). Jesus now addresses the 1st commandment (Ex. 20:3). God must be God in our lives. He must be preeminent. No one or thing can stand between Him and us. The particular demand Jesus puts on the rich young ruler is not a general command or condition for all persons. It was specific to him though it could be specific also to some of us too! His wealth occupied the place that only God should have in his life. It was his idol. It was his god. He may have obeyed, relatively speaking, those commands which address human relationships, but he lived in perpetual disobedience, sin and idolatry when it came to the first and foundational commandments: *You shall have no other gods before me*. You come up short in your life in one crucial area Jesus was saying: what will be first? Jesus offers Himself as a substitute for the man’s wealth. Only when he sells all and gives it away will he become like a small vulnerable child. Only then will he actually possess everything!

- The call to discipleship (a major theme as we have seen in chapters 8-10) is a call to radical trust and commitment to Jesus. Jesus challenges the young man, as He challenges each one of us, to put away anything that is an obstacle to our following Him. The verse should be read as a whole. He could not love his wealth supremely and love Jesus supremely. One would of necessity rule out the other.
- Verse 22 records the tragic end of their encounter; “Disheartened.” His countenance dropped. A cloud of gloom and sorrow moved in. “He went away sorrowful.” Why? “For he had great possessions.” This is the first and only time

Mark indicates he was rich. His gold would remain his god. Jesus' difficult demand was met with a "no." The priority of the rich young ruler would be his money and not the Master. He got the right answer. He just did not give the right response. James Edwards insightfully notes, "A person who leads an exemplary life – who even endears himself to the Son of God – can still be an idolater" (p. 313).

II. It is harder than you think.

10:23-27

The rich young ruler had come to the right person (Jesus). He had asked, in some sense, the right question: how do I inherit eternal life? He had received the right answer: make Jesus your God and follow Him in complete trust and dependence like a little child. Sadly he did not answer correctly and he turned and walked away from the only true source of eternal life. "When Jesus called this young man to give up his money, the man started to grieve, because money was for him what the Father was for Jesus. It was the center of his identity. To lose his money would have been to lose himself" (Tim Keller, *King's Cross*, 132). All of this gave Jesus an open door to further instruct His disciples concerning entrance into the kingdom and the demands of discipleship. Valuable lessons, indeed, follow.

1) One thing can cost you salvation.

10:23-25

- "Jesus looked around" (v. 23). He wanted to be sure He had the disciples attention. "And he said to his disciples, "how difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Jesus was not condemning wealth and commending poverty. This is not a call for ascetic or monastic living. The point is simply this: wealth breeds self-sufficiency and confidence in one's self, who you

are and what you have. Furthermore, it has an addictive quality. Time and again Scripture addresses its dangerous attraction (see Matt. 6:19-21, 24; Luke 12:13-21; 16:19-30; 1 Tim. 6:17). If one is not careful it becomes life's priority and the things of God pass by the wayside.

- Jesus' statement stunned the disciples. "The disciples were amazed at his words" (v. 24). They could not believe their ears! So to make sure they understood, Jesus said it again, v. 24, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! Verse 25: "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." Jesus repeats himself but prefaces His statement with a term of tenderness: "Children." The illustration of a camel going through the eye of a needle is an example of hyperbole or exaggeration to make the point. The camel was one of the largest animals found in that part of the world. The thought of trying to squeeze it, humps and all, through the eye of a needle would strike His disciples as funny, and also impossible. I guess salvation is harder than we thought they said. And, it takes only one thing like wealth to keep you out of God's kingdom. They sure did not see that coming. Once again Jesus turns the value system of the world on its head.

2) Only God can provide you salvation. 10:26-27

- The 12 were "exceedingly astonished", amazed at what Jesus had just said (v. 26). They responded then with a reasonable and important question: "Then who can be saved?" Judaism was guilty of its own "prosperity theology." Wealth and riches were seen as an evidence of God's favor (see Job 1:10; 42:10; Ps. 128:1-2; Is. 3:10). Jesus corrected their bad theology. The possession or absence of wealth is

no sign of God's favor. Indeed wealth can build a barrier to the one thing necessary to enter the kingdom: helpless childlike trust in Jesus (v. 15).

- For a second time Jesus looked at them (v. 27). No doubt all eyes were glued on him and all ears were open to what he would say. His response is one of the great theological affirmations in The Bible, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Gabriel said to Mary, "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Jonah proclaimed "salvation comes from the Lord" (Jon. 2:9).
- Salvation is something man cannot accomplish. Left to himself he will never make it into God's kingdom and he will never inherit eternal life. However, what man cannot do God can. Salvation is not through human achievement. It is, has always been, and will always be a divine accomplishment thru the perfect atonement and sacrificial death of God's Son. Done not do!
- When it comes to entering God's Kingdom and receiving eternal life there are 2 non-negotiable truths: 1) With men it is impossible and no one will be saved; 2) With God all things are possible and anyone can be saved! If you desire for Christ to be your Savior, you have to replace what you have been looking to as a savior. We all have something. What's yours? That is an excellent "life question" to consider.

III. It is better than you think.

10:28-31

Given all that has transpired in the last few moments we could suspect that the disciples would be confused and have lots of questions. They needed to think things over before they responded to all of this. Of course the one exception is Peter! He blurts out another

silly statement that is clearly off base, misguided and somewhat egocentric. Or is it?! He does not receive a stern rebuke from our Lord. Rather Jesus seizes the opportunity to provide additional teaching on discipleship. Perhaps this was more of a heart-felt plea.

1) Leave a little and get a lot.

10:28-30

- Peter, the ever-ready spokesman for the disciples picks up on the words of Jesus in verse 21 and says in v. 28, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus responds in v. 29 and simply affirms that whatever you might lose or give up in this present age (or life) for me (Jesus) and the gospel, you will not fail to receive a hundred times as much “now in this time” (v. 30) ... and in the age to come; “eternal life” (cf. v. 17 and “eternal life’s” only other occurrence in this section). The things Jesus notes we may have to give up are precious things: home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands. It costs to follow Jesus. However, the blessings far outweigh the losses. In God’s kingdom the benefits and blessings are simply too great to imagine. One surprising entry concerning blessings in the present age is “persecutions.” The inclusion of this reality strikes a sobering note of realism for the person who would follow Jesus in radical discipleship. To be a member of Christ’s kingdom means to share in all that is His. This includes suffering and persecution on His behalf, a light and momentary affliction when seen against the promise of eternal life.
- John Piper specifically applies these verses to those called to be missionaries. And, since all of us are called to be missionaries his words are instructive and appropriate for each of us: “This text does not mean that you get materially rich by becoming a missionary—at least not in the sense that your own private

possessions increase. It means mainly that if you are deprived of your earthly family in the service of Christ, it will be made up a hundredfold in your spiritual family, the church. But even this may be too limiting. What about the lonely missionaries who labor for years without being surrounded by hundreds of sisters and brothers and mothers and children in the faith? Is the promise not true for them? Surely it is. Surely what Christ means is that he himself makes up for every loss. If you give up a mother's nearby affection and concern, you get back one hundred times the affection and concern from the ever-present Christ. If you give up the warm comradeship of a brother, you get back one hundred times the warmth and camaraderie from Christ. If you give up the sense of at-homeness you had in your house, you get back one hundred times the comfort and security of knowing that your Lord owns every house and land and stream and tree on earth. Isn't what Jesus is saying to prospective missionaries just this: I promise to work for you and be for you so much that you will not be able to speak of having sacrificed anything. That's the way Hudson Taylor took it, because at the end of his 50 years of missionary labor in China he said, "I never made a sacrifice." ("Missions: the Battle Cry of Christian Hedonism" 11-13-83).

- So, leave a little and get a lot.

2) Be last and come in first.

10:31

- Verse 31 is another hinge verse connecting and contrasting the rich young ruler (10:17-31) with the Servant of the Lord, the Lord Jesus (10:32-45).
- We heard a similar statement to this verse in 9:35. Again, the value system of this present evil age is turned on its head.

- “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” is one of those sayings of Jesus He no doubt repeated on numerous occasions. It shows up several times in the gospels (cf. Matt. 19:30; 20:16). We cannot be certain of its meaning and application here. Is it a rebuke of the actions of the rich young ruler? Of Peter’s impulsive declaration? With certainty we can say this: in Christ’s kingdom there is a grand reversal of every earthly standard of position, rank and importance. God does not evaluate things in the same way fallen humanity does. As citizens of His kingdom His children should think more like Him than the world.
- I like how Warren Wiersbe puts it, “To the general public, the rich young ruler stood first and the poor disciples stood last. But God saw things from the perspective of eternity – and the first become last while the last become first. Those who are first in their own eyes will be last in God’s eyes, but those who are last in their own eyes will be rewarded as first! What an encouragement for true disciples!” (*Be Diligent*, 103).

Conclusion: 1) Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York says, “The heart of the gospel is all about giving up power, pouring out resources and serving ... the Center of Christianity is always migrating away from power and wealth” (*King’s Cross*, 124).

2) Jesus said to the rich, young ruler, “I want you to imagine life without money. All you have is me. Am I really enough?” Do you truly believe the person who has Jesus + nothing actually has everything? That is the question Jesus puts before this man. It is the same question He puts before us as well. How will you answer?!