

Pentecost 20 / October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

What must we do to inherit eternal life? What must we do to inherit anything? Probably we should be on good terms with the person from whom we wish to receive the inheritance. We won't inherit anything if we get cut out of the will! Most inheritances are passed on within families, so if we want to increase our prospects of receiving a big inheritance, we should make sure we are born into a wealthy family! That's the tricky part! Let me know if you figure out how that can be done.

Jewish inheritances in the first century were passed down almost exclusively to children. Household servants might receive something, such as freedom from the household if they were slaves. However, the vast bulk of the inheritance went to the sons. A servant could become the heir, if there was no male child, or if the heir did something to get cut out of the will! In Genesis, Abraham prayed that God would make his servant Eliezer of Damascus his heir, because he and Sarah remained without a biological son. God refused. Despite their advanced age they would have a biological heir. A son was always the preferred heir.

With that in mind, it seems odd that the man in our gospel asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. In a certain sense there was nothing he could do. In another sense, he already was an heir. As a Jewish male he was a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, a son of Israel through circumcision into the covenant God made through Moses. What more did he need? Obviously, something troubled him that didn't bother other religious Judeans, who considered themselves heirs of eternal life, simply because they were descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

John the baptizer warned the biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah against basing their relationship with God on their biology. He said, “Produce fruits in keeping with repentance and don't say to yourselves we are Abraham's offspring, for God is able to raise offspring for Abraham from these stones.” Unlike others, he wasn't complacent in his relationship with the God of Israel. He was troubled in his soul, but the trouble was he was basing his relationship with God on himself and his actions, rather than on God and His actions. What must we do to be saved, to be heirs of eternal life? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved! Jesus does it all! He gives it to all who believe as a free gift of His love!

What would you give to live forever? This man came to Jesus with the most important question of human existence. What must I do to have eternal life? In antiquity, eternal life was the essential difference between the gods and human beings. The ancient gods were no different than humans in their nature, except that they had super powers and they lived forever. Only the gods had eternal life. Only they could bestow eternal life on humans; something which they rarely did. The world gave up belief in those gods centuries ago, no one cares about them; but people still care about eternal life. The Postmodern modern world has given up belief in God altogether, but people continue to seek eternal life.

Why do we die? Is there something in our genetic code that can be altered, so that our bodies regenerate organs? Can we change our DNA so cells reproduce at a constant rate, so that our bodies sustain a certain physical age indefinitely? We want to be forever young! Who wants to live forever as a one-hundred-year-old! Can we enhance our immune system, so that we will be immune to viruses and bacteria and invulnerable to everything, save for catastrophic injury? Even at that, perhaps we can clone ourselves, keep a spare body on the side and transfer our cerebral files when this body wears out or is damaged?

What would we be willing to give to live forever? If science achieves such a thing it won't come cheap. It won't be part of our basic health care. It will only be an option for the wealthy. If we had the cash, how much would we be willing to pay to live forever? Perhaps not as much as we think! This man came to Jesus, asked the question that has haunted humanity for ages, got an answer and still walked away from the deal. Apparently, it was too pricey!

Stop and think about it! He asked the unanswerable question, expressing the deepest longing of the human spirit, got an answer, ‘give your possessions away, follow me and you will have treasure in heaven.’ But instead of jumping at the offer he said, ‘Nah’ and walked away. Apparently eternal life wasn't as important as he thought. How important is eternal life to us? Since we know and believe eternal life comes through Jesus, the real question is “How important is Jesus to us?” What would we be willing to give up to follow Him?

The New Testament is filled with passages that speak to the necessity of following Jesus in faith and of eternal life as the outcome of faith. Jesus said, "I am the way and truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He said, "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever believes in me will never truly die." He said, people who believe in Him have passed from death to life and already have eternal life in this life. There is no one more important than Jesus and nothing more important than following Him in faith and faithfulness, no matter what the cost!

So why did this man who received the answer to the most essential existential question of human life, turn and walk away? He turned away, because when it came down to it, he didn't believe in Jesus! There was something more important in His life than Jesus. Is there anything in our lives more important than Jesus? He called Jesus "Good Teacher," an expression reserved almost exclusively for God, but his actions showed told a different story. He claimed faith, but when it came down to it, his actions showed what he really believed and where His confidence really rested. Mark says "He went away sad, because he had many possessions."

But Jesus loved him, as He loves you and I. Jesus loved him and called him to Himself, as He calls us to Himself. Jesus looked at him, loved him with all the love of God and said "Follow me." Jesus called, but he would not follow. This is one of saddest scenes in the bible. The eternal Son of God, through whom all things came to be and in whom all things are held together, looks this man in the eyes, calls him to Himself that he might give him eternal life and he turns and walks away. Jesus told the disciples "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him." The Father drew this man to Jesus and still he turned away. What could be more important than eternal life? What could be more important than knowing Jesus as Saviour and following Him as Lord?

This man was very wealthy and it seems that was the reason he turned from Jesus and walked away. Mark comments, "Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." He had great possessions, but it wasn't his possessions that caused him to walk away. Many people in the bible had great possession and still followed the call of God; Abraham for instance. Peter, James and John had a successful commercial fishing business, and still they followed when Jesus called. It wasn't this man's possessions themselves that was the problem. The problem was the way he looked at his possessions. They were his real source of life.

We don't have to be wealthy to walk away from Jesus, we just have to consider our present possessions, no matter what they are or how meagre they are in the eyes of others, as more important than Jesus. In fact, the things that tempt us from following Jesus don't even have to be possessions. Anything that is more important to us than Jesus, leads us away from Him and the life He gives in time and for eternity. We receive everything from God. We receive life with God through Jesus. No one gives more than Jesus. Nothing is more important than following Him in faith and in faithfulness! He gives eternal life. He is eternal life!

Jesus said on a different occasion, "Whoever would come after me must deny himself take up his cross and follow me." What would we not be willing to give up to follow Jesus? Its really a silly question. Everything comes from God to begin with. Everything will be returned to God some day. What do we have that we will not eventually give up? Do you have a last will and testament? You might as well, because we possess nothing that we will keep forever. Everything will be passed on when we pass away. The only possession we will keep forever is Jesus. There is no earthly treasure that can compare with the treasure of knowing Jesus as Saviour and following Him in faith and faithfulness. He is eternal life. He gives eternal life to all who receive Him!

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus is the greatest treasure. He gives the treasure of eternal life to all who follow Him in faith. In Him we receive the riches of God's love in forgiveness. Through faith in Him, we receive the wealth of God's love in a relationship of peace in time and an inheritance of eternal life in His resurrection. What must we do to inherit eternal life? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our life in relationship to the Father in time and for eternity. God bless us always with faith to believe and to follow Him all the days of our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen