WHAT MUST I DO TO GET ETERNAL LIFE?

Matthew 19:16-30

Key Verse: 21

“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

“What must I do to get eternal life?” Among all the questions we human beings pose, this question is the most important question. In today's passage, a man came to Jesus with this question. And Jesus knew who the man was and answered him at his spiritual eye level. But after hearing Jesus’ answer that required the change of his life direction the man tossed off Jesus’ invitation to eternal life.

Let’s join the dialogue between the man and Jesus. Look at verse 16. **“Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’”** Although this man’s name was unknown, he was young and very wealthy (20, 22). According to Luke 18:18, he was also a ruler. Wow. The man got everything: youngness, riches, and power. These days, people call this kind of person, “Big shot,” or “Mogul,” or “Tycoon.” On top of his great career, he was morally upstanding. He had kept all the commandments and laws since he was a boy (Mk 10:20). So as a society icon, he could have been confident, positive, proud, and arrogant. But he was not. Rather, he was humble. According to Mark 10:17, he ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before Jesus. Then he humbly asked Jesus a question. Even his question was beautiful and amazing. It was not a malicious entrapping question like the Pharisees’. It was authentic and it came from the heart. “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” I hope many people ask this question until they get the answer.

This man’s question reveals many things about him, especially about the condition of his soul. After getting great wealth, governing power, youthful vigor, and living a rigorous religious life from his boyhood he felt that there was still something incomplete. He realized that that ‘something’ was eternal life he didn’t have. He was willing to do anything if he could get eternal life as he had done to get whatever he wanted in the past. So, he asked Jesus what he should do to get eternal life. He used the words, “to get eternal life.”

We all know that life is not what we can get or earn from somewhere. I saw a man with cancer struggle hard to save his life, but he could not buy life or earn it. In the end, his life was taken away. Life is in God. John 1:4 says, “In him was life…” So life is a gift from God. If our life here in this world is a gift from God, how much more is eternal life. But the rich young ruler thought that he could get or earn eternal life by doing certain good things. This sort of idea was based on the law of cause and effect. For example, one who works hard can get a paycheck. Or one who trains hard can win a competition and get a trophy. Likewise, the rich young ruler thought that if he did certain good things he would get eternal life. He was confident that if he knew the good thing to get eternal life, he would definitely do and get it.

What was Jesus’ answer? Look at verse 17. **“‘Why do you ask me about what is good?’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.’”** Jesus first corrected his question by giving a counter question: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.” Jesus gave him this counter question because he wanted to help the man acknowledge first that human beings are sinful and fundamentally incapable of doing good things. Only God is good all the time. And all the time God alone is good. And so only God’s work is good and he does good all the time. On the other hand there is no human being righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10). In sin, everyone falls far short of God’s glory (Ro 3:23). But the young man thought that he could do good things. He thought that he had struggled hard to get wealth, power and law-abiding life and obtained all these things in a good and right way. He thought that he was a good man capable of doing good things. To open this young man’s spiritual eyes to see himself before God, Jesus drew the man’s attention to God who alone is good. In other words, Jesus wanted him to see his own sins, faults, and limitations before God. It was because in order to receive eternal life, he should first recognize that he was not good but sinful and wretched and so needed the savior.

Jesus also said to him, **“If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”** Some people may misunderstand Jesus’ words here and say, “Oh, Jesus stated that the man could get eternal life by keeping the commandments.” But Jesus’ subsequent dialogues with the man show us that Jesus helped him from his spiritual eye level, and so he started with the commandments that the man had known. Because of his spiritual blindness Jesus could not teach him about salvation by faith not by work right away. Anyway, Jesus didn’t vindicate that the man could get eternal life by doing good works.

The rich young man asked, “Which ones?” He thought that as far as keeping the commandments was concerned, he was confident. The man asked Jesus to identify specific ones out of 613 commandments. Maybe he was expecting that Jesus would narrow down the list to a few. What was Jesus' answer? Look at verses 18b-19. **“Jesus replied, ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.’”** These commandments are the second half of the Ten Commandments from 5th through 9th plus Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself” which, according to Jesus, is the second greatest commandment (Mt 22:39).

In verse 20, the young man said, **“All these I have kept. What do I still lack?**” What? Had he kept them all? Are you serious? Even a rigorously trained religious man, Paul confessed honestly in Romans 7:22-23, **“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”** Maybe the rich young man delighted in God’s law as he studied the Bible. Maybe he thought that keeping them all meant just enjoying the words of God through Bible studies, but never mind living in obedience to God’s commandments. Most probably, he didn’t murder, commit adultery and so forth. But did he not really tell a lie to others? Moreover, did he really love his neighbors as himself? As himself? Maybe he thought that he loved his neighbor because he said to his neighbors, “Hi and bye” with a plastic smile, not even knowing the neighbor’s name. Anyhow, later he proved himself wrong about keeping the commandments when Jesus asked him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. He could not do it. Evidently, he didn’t really know about himself and about keeping the commandments. He lived in delusion.

Then he asked Jesus confidently, **“What do I still lack?”** At this point, Jesus could have told him, “Young man, know yourself first. Then put your faith in me. Then you will have eternal life.” But Jesus didn’t say that, because the young man in his spiritual blindness still thought that he was a good man and not in need of a savior. With patience and love, Jesus answered him again from his spiritual level. Look at verse 21. **“Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”** In short, Jesus said to him to repent and follow Jesus. Jesus told him to give to the poor everything he had and follow Jesus. Jesus knew that many good things he possessed blocked him from receiving eternal life. Unless he didn’t remove those good things, he could not see God and have a right relationship with him. The rich man earnestly wanted to get eternal life maybe because of the fear of death. Yet, he didn’t really bother to know God and having a right relationship with him personally. He tried to maintain his religious life by just keeping the law to a bare minimum. But eternal life is not just a life everlasting without death. Jesus in his prayer to God defined eternal life in John 17:3, **“Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”** So those who know and experience God and his Son Jesus the Savior personally have eternal life here now on earth and live everlasting life with God in heaven.

But many good things of the world block us from knowing God. Many good things hinder us from having eternal life. Many good things enslave us. There is a cliché that we know: “The good is the enemy of the best.” Knowing God and receiving eternal life is the best. Then what is the enemy of eternal life? It is the good—good things in the world. In short, the good that we possess can be the very enemy of God. The rich young man possessed good things but those good things clouded his spiritual eyes to see and know God. Therefore, to have eternal life by knowing God, we need to let go of the good we tightly hold and enjoy. I found that from the word, “Good” if I take out one “O” I have the word “God.” If we regard good things of the world as “O” nothing, we can see God.

In order to give him eternal life, Jesus challenged the man to exchange earthly treasure for treasure in heaven. Having good possessions is not sin. But these possessions can take the place of God in our heart and become our idols which we trust and depend on, rather than God. At this time, can we look into ourselves and see good things of the world in us that hold us from knowing God and having a personal relationship with him? And can we sell those worldly attachments, pleasures and loves in our hearts and store the lasting treasure in heaven?

Jesus lastly told the man, **“Then come, follow me.”** It was Jesus’ life-giving invitation to the man. And it was the ultimate answer to the man’s question, “What good things must I do to get eternal life?” It is the same invitation that Jesus called his 12 disciples. To get eternal life is to know Jesus the Messiah who came to the world to be the Lamb of God to save sinners and give them eternal life as his everlasting gift.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means to listen to Jesus, learn from Jesus until we believe in him the Messiah and put our trust in him. it means to give him first place in our hearts and imitate his lifestyle. For example, Peter was originally a fisherman. So, when he followed Jesus, he revealed his rough, rugged, and impulsive fisherman’ behavior and mentality many times. Presumably, he hurt his fellow disciples many times and hindered Jesus many times. We remember, once Jesus told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” after Peter was spitting out his thoughtless impulsive words to Jesus (Mt 16:23). But as he kept following Jesus, he shed his fisherman’ behavior and mentality and became like Jesus. When we ready his letters, 1 and 2 Peter, we can almost smell Jesus in Peter. In the end, he died as a martyr as Jesus died. According to the legend, at the execution cite, he said to the executioner, “I’d like to be crucified up-side-down because I am unworthy to die as my Lord died.”

Let’s come back to the today’s story. Look at verse 22. **“When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”** What a sad story it is. The man went away sad, because he could not give up his wealth. He went away sad, because he couldn't make a decision to follow Jesus and receive eternal life. His good possessions took him captive and made him fail to receive the most important gift from Jesus, eternal life. His sad story reminds us of a foolish monkey. A hunter made a small hole in a box, just enough to fit a monkey hand, and placed a banana inside. A monkey came along, put his hand inside the box and tries to get the banana out. But the banana and his hand together were too big to fit through the hole. The monkey refused the let go of the delicious treat and was captured by the hunter. Let’s learn from this man’s failure and from the foolish monkey. Let us give away worldly things in our hearts and follow Jesus.

Jesus was very sorry to see the rich young man reject eternal life. He spoke to his disciples in verses 23-24, **“Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”** Does Jesus mean that no rich person can get into heaven? No. Rather, those who idolize wealth instead of trusting and relying on God cannot enter heaven. When the disciples in their astonishment asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” God can make a camel go through the eye of a needle and God can save anyone who comes to Jesus by faith.

Then Jesus promised abundant rewards for his disciples and those who have sacrificed for his sake. He said in verse 29, **“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”**

Today we learned about the answer to the most important question, “What must I do to get eternal life?” According to Jesus’ teaching, we can receive eternal life when we let go of good things on earth which are our idols and come to Jesus and follow him. Let us not be like a foolish monkey or the rich fool young man. But let us leave the good and receive the best the eternal life by following Jesus and trusting him. Life on earth is short, but eternal life is everlasting. Let us choose to follow Jesus and enjoy eternal love relationship with God.