

What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?

Luke 10:25-37

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 29, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37, NRSV)

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“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” How would you answer that question? What does a person need to do to *inherit* eternal life? It’s a very good question, one I think that is probably asked by everybody in some form or another. How do I find the best that there is in life, whatever that might be? What do I need to do to so that I can *really live*? How do I find, get, earn, discover, and then hold on to that sort of life? Doesn’t everybody want to know the answer to that question? I have no doubt that as soon as this lawyer asked this question to Jesus, everybody within earshot stopped their side conversations and leaned in closer to make sure they could hear whatever answer it was that Jesus would give. “Hold on. Hold on. I want to hear what he has to say about this.”

But here’s the thing about Jesus. If you ask Jesus a question there is a high probability that he is going to answer your question with another question. He knows, you see, that there is usually a question beneath the question and it’s the deeper, hidden question that he wants to expose. That’s where the action is. In this case, as we’ll soon see, the lawyer asks a *good* question, but asking it from a *bad* place. The text tells us, in fact, that he’s trying to test Jesus. Specifically, he’s asking the question as a way of trying to gain an advantage over Jesus, and he has no intention of actually implementing whatever answer Jesus gives. It’s a game for this guy, but Jesus doesn’t play games.

“What is written in the law? What do you read there?” What does the Bible say about eternal life? Since you already believe you know the answer you pretend to be looking for, let’s hear from you what you think the answer is. And sure enough, the lawyer doesn’t hesitate, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.**” Spend your life loving the Lord with all your passion, all your prayer, all your muscle, all your intelligence, and love your neighbor as well as you love yourself, then eternal life will be yours.

If this was a theology exam the lawyer nails it. A+ 100% He cites the great command to love God from Deuteronomy 6:5, and then throws in the second great command to love neighbor from Leviticus 19:18. It’s the right answer, especially because there is some evidence that by this time in Israel people had already begun to combine these two Old Testament commands as a way of summarizing the heart of God’s Law. Jesus himself has embraced this position at other points in his teaching.¹ In other words, after hearing the lawyer’s response people in the crowd that day would have whispered to one another, “Oh, good answer”, and then turned to Jesus to see if he would agree.

Jesus does agree. “**You have given the right answer,**” he tells the man. But then he adds this, “**Do this, and you will live.**” You *know* the right answer, now *live* it. You’ve aced the written part of the exam. Now comes the road test. So go now and love God with all heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself, and you will indeed have eternal life.

¹ See Matthew 22:36-40

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? Think about it this way. What if I told you this morning that the way for you to get eternal life is for you, starting today, to actually love God completely, with every aspect of your life, and to also love the people around you in this world as much as you love yourself? How would you respond? Assuming you understood the requirements, you would respond, if you were honest, as the disciples elsewhere responded when faced with the same requirements, “Who then can be saved?”² If this is what is required for salvation, then there is not a single one of us can be saved. Am I wrong? Any of you think I’m wrong? Any of you think you can love like this? All your heart? All your soul? All your strength? All your mind? All your neighbors?

And so imagine if the lawyer, at that point, had responded by saying, “If that’s the case, Jesus, if I have to actually *do* this, then I’m in trouble. I can’t do this. I can’t love like this, even for a day.” If that was his response, I wonder what Jesus would have said next. I have to think it would have had something to do with mercy. But that’s not how the lawyer responded because, remember, he’s not looking for mercy. He already knows, or thinks he already knows how to get eternal life. He’s just testing Jesus. So Luke tells us, **“But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”**

And there it is, the question beneath the question. Jesus flushed it out, just like he always flushes it out. This man doesn’t want Jesus to help him find eternal life; he wants Jesus to publicly endorse the means he has already chosen to get eternal life. He believes he can fulfill the two great commands, at least as he understands them, to the point where God will reward his obedience with salvation. So mercy is the last thing he wants. Affirmation of his goodness, his ability, his intentions, are what he wants. His question about neighbors, in fact, implies superiority and exclusion. Not everybody is a neighbor worthy to be loved. Some are; some aren’t. And not everybody can love neighbors like I do. Some can; some can’t.

And how does Jesus respond? He tells a parable. As we walk through it together remember that whenever a parable is told there is an implied invitation for the hearers of that parable to find themselves in the parable. Jesus is giving the lawyer a job. You are somewhere in this story, he’s telling him, and you need to find out where. I would suggest to you that we have the same job here this morning. This isn’t a story with a moral. That’s not what a parable is. This is life. You are in this story, which means that the parable will be useless to you today unless, by the end, you see yourself in the

story and, in doing so, learn something about God and yourself that changes life for you from this point forward.

So are you ready? Do you understand your job? Find yourself in this story.³

There was once a Jew who was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho. It was a seventeen mile journey that descended nearly 2,000 feet along one of the most dangerous roads in history. It was an ideal place for thieves to ambush travelers, which is exactly what happens to this man who is attacked, robbed of all his possessions including his clothing, and beaten so severely that he was left for dead along the roadside.

Incidentally, in those days there were two ways you could identify a person you met along the road. Their speech was the first way, not just a person’s language but their accent. Second, their clothing. Jews dressed differently than Greeks who dressed differently from Romans. This man, therefore, was unidentifiable. He’s naked and he unconscious, which means that to anybody passing by that day this man, this neighbor, was just a human being in need, his attachment to any ethnic or religious community is indiscernible at this point. It’s a hint to what is to come. As he defines who our neighbors are, this is as narrow as Jesus is going to make that definition. Is the person human? That’s your neighbor.

Well, as the story continues we get some good news. A priest of all people just happened to come down the road shortly after the attack. I’m sure the dying man would have preferred a doctor or a paramedic, but a priest will do. Now, the fact that he’s going *down* the road tells us that he’s traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho which then tells us that he is likely on his way home after a time of service in the Temple. He’s purified himself and ready now to present himself as such to the people back home. But then he sees this body by the side of the road. He knows immediately what has happened. He doesn’t know, however, whether the man is dead or alive. And that’s a problem because Jewish law strictly prohibited a priest from coming within four cubits of a corpse. To do so would immediately make him spiritually impure. He also doesn’t know if the man is a Jew or a Gentile. There is one way to tell on a naked man but he’s not getting close enough to check. We know he’s a Jew, but he doesn’t. And that’s another problem because any contact with a Gentile would also make him spiritually

³ I’m greatly indebted to understanding the contextual details of this story to Kenneth E. Bailey in *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, 1980), 33-56. I highly recommend his brilliant commentary on this text.

² See Luke 18:26

impure. On top of this he certainly would have been aware that this all could have been a trap, the body simply bait to lure others into the hands of these same robbers.

It's easy to be hard on this priest but we must be careful here. In Jewish culture there would have not been a single person who would have blamed him for what he did next. In fact, he would have been applauded for his decision. He had to choose between duty and duty. His desire to remain pure before God is no different than your desire to remain pure before God. So in a sincere effort to do so, he steers his horse to the other side of the road and passes by.

Not long after another religious man, a Levite this time, comes walking after the priest. No horse for this man because a Levite is not nearly as important as a priest. He also sees the body along the road, but because he's not bound by the same purity laws as the priest, he actually goes over to take a closer look. In doing so, perhaps he recognizes the man still has breath in him. But there's a problem. To begin with, the Levite has no horse to carry this man to help. What's the point, then, of just sitting there beside him as he dies and, in doing so, putting himself at risk of the same fate? But more than that, historians tell us that anybody traveling on that road in those days would have been acutely aware of others also traveling along the road. When you're traveling down a dangerous road you want to be as aware as possible of your fellow travelers. For that reason, it would have been assumed by Jesus' audience that in the story the Levite knew that the priest was just ahead of him on the road. What would it look like, therefore, if a Levite, who is an inferior to this priest, stops and lends aid to this man after the priest passed him by. To do so would have been an affront to his superior, an accusation made towards him of inhumanity and hardness of heart.⁴ If the priest passed on by, who am I, a mere Levite, to think I shouldn't to the same.

And again, it's easy to be hard on the man but be careful. Would you have the guts to do differently? If you're driving by yourself through a dangerous neighborhood one night and see a person you know nothing about lying on the sidewalk, are you willing to risk your own safety by stopping to help? Would I cross barriers that would intentionally call judgment on those who are my superiors in the faith who haven't crossed those barriers? Maybe, but to do so would certainly require some courage.

Let me pause here to make sure you understand that at this point in the story Jesus would have had everybody

eating out of his hand. The crowd would have loved it. Because they knew what was coming next. Remember the context. Jesus is telling this story, in the first place, to answer a question about inheriting eternal life, and everybody has agreed to this point, including Jesus, that eternal life is connected to loving your neighbor. Clearly, everybody sees at this point that the Jew in the ditch is our neighbor. But the priest missed it. Now the Levi missed it. But we know who's coming next. An ordinary Jew is coming next. Somebody like us is coming next. We have found ourselves in the story and, thank God, Jesus has cast us in an honorable role! That's what the crowd is thinking and they can't wait for it. We are going to be justified today! You don't have to be a priest or Levite to get eternal life. Ordinary Jews, by simply loving our fellow Jews in need, can get it too!

There is simply no way for us to appreciate the bewilderment and confusion the crowd must have immediately experienced when Jesus then said these next words, **"But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity."**

What!?! A Samaritan? Did he just say 'Samaritan'? Samaritans and Jews hated one another. *Hated* one another. These half-breeds, descended centuries before from Jews who had intermarried with pagans who worshipped foreign gods, lived to the north of Israel. They rejected the Temple in Jerusalem and built their own place of worship. They were considered unclean, outcasts, and heretics, the polar opposite of the priest, the Levite, and, in fact, the lawyer standing there in front of Jesus. A common Jewish prayer in those days was that Samaritans would never experience eternal life. A popular Jewish saying declared, "He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like the one that eats the flesh of swine." And you know how the Jews felt about bacon!

You see, if Jesus had made the man in the ditch a Samaritan and made the hero a Jew, that would still have been extremely hard to swallow for his Jewish audience. But far easier than this. Why on earth would Jesus place the Samaritan in the place of superiority? And to make him show compassion to the Jew? Not a chance. It's pure fiction. Any Samaritan in those days coming across a half-dead Jew on the road down to Jericho would only have come close to that Jew so that he could spit on the body or, if he was still breathing, finish him off. Nobody in those days would even be able to dream of the story Jesus is now telling. But it's Jesus' story and he's telling it the way he wants to tell it.

⁴ Bailey, 46-47.

It gets worse. In fact, the details that Jesus gives about the care this Samaritan offers this half-dead Jew are given as a way to say that this man is now making up for the actions of everybody else before him in the story. Others showed apathy or even hatred, he shows compassion. Others caused and then ignored his wounds; he bandages the wounds, pours healing oil and cleansing wine on them. The Priest stayed on his horse; he gets off his horse to make a place for the man and then walks him all the way to town. Others stripped this man of his wealth; he gives of his wealth to help him. Others abandoned him; he promises to come back to ensure he has everything he needs.

In all of this, by the way, the Samaritan puts his own life in danger, not only from robbers who might have similarly attacked him, but from other Jews who would have seen what he had done. It's possible, in fact, that this half-dead Jew, if he were given the choice, might rather have died than to have received help from, and then be put in debt to, a Samaritan! And imagine the risk of not just bringing the man close to Jericho and leaving him somewhere he might be found and helped, but actually taking him to town and then staying with him in the inn while he recovers. Imagine a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon, and then staying the night to take care of him. Any Indian so brave would be fortunate to get out of the city alive *even* if he had saved the cowboy's life!⁵ But that's what is happening here. This Samaritan is doing what nobody wants him to do. That's the story Jesus tell the lawyer, and the crowds, and us, in response to the question about neighbors and eternal life. So where in the world are we supposed to find ourselves in this story?

Most times I have heard this text taught it has been as a moralistic lesson. You know, God is looking for the sorts of people who are willing to stop along the way in life and help those who are in need of help, even if those people who need help are your enemies. If you become that sort of person, you will have found eternal life. Isn't that the way many of you would summarize the moral of this story? Be a good Samaritan. And if the third man coming down the road in the story was a Jew, that's the lesson we might rightly take. But he's not a Jew. He's a Samaritan, which means that no Jew in that day would have walked away with that message. Nor should we.

Remember, the lawyer asked one question: "Who is my neighbor?" But Jesus changed the question to, "Who was the neighbor?" He asks the lawyer, "**Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the**

man who fell into the hands of the robber?" It's a trap. Play games with Jesus and you are going to get trapped. There is no good way for this lawyer to answer. He knows the answer but he hates the answer. The neighbor is the person I hate. The lawyer can't even say the word Samaritan. He answers, "**The one who showed mercy.**" How bitter those words must have tasted coming out of his mouth.

Then Jesus throws the knock-out punch. The lawyer knows it's coming because he's already seen it. But now that we're clear on exactly who the neighbor is, Jesus says it again: "**Go and do likewise.**" Go and give your life away for your neighbor, and your neighbor is simply the person who happens to be near you in this world, whoever that is, even that person hates your guts and would never lift a finger to help you and might even do whatever he or she could to destroy you. That's your neighbor. Go love that person as much as you love yourself, and then eternal life is yours. That's the lesson of this parable not only for the lawyer but for you and for me.

And all at once, if we have ears to hear, we see where we are in the story. Do you see it? That's us in the ditch, naked, half-dead, with no possible means of ever saving ourselves. You see, if eternal life for you depends on your ability to love God and love your neighbors like this, then eternal life is absolutely out of reach for you. For me as well. There is no way for us to justify ourselves. We cannot do what Jesus is telling us here we must do.

I didn't mention, however, that there is another question we are always meant to ask when we listen to one of Jesus' parables. Once we figure out where we are in the story, the next and even more important question we must ask is where is God. So where is God in the story? If we are the one in the ditch, where is Christ in the parable of the Good Samaritan? As soon as I ask the question you know the answer.

The prophet Isaiah described the coming Messiah long before Jesus arrived on the scene. Listen to these words from Isaiah 61, words which Jesus actually quoted as his calling card at the beginning of his earthly ministry to announce his arrival:

**The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the
oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;**

⁵ Bailey, 52.

**to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
 to give them a garland instead of ashes,
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
 the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.⁶**

I know you have been told before that you are to aspire to be the Samaritan in this story, but I want you to think differently about this story. You are not the Samaritan, at least not at first. Christ is the Samaritan, the one who was despised and rejected who comes along to give everything he has, even his very life, to make up for all that others have done wrong or failed to do right. He is the one who takes for himself the place of the servant, getting off his horse and setting us in his place that he might lead us to a place of healing. In Romans 5:8 Paul declares, **“But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us?”** While we were still in the ditch, helpless and near death, it was Christ, the one we scorned, who came near and gave all that we might live.

When we wake up in the inn, healed, our debts paid in full, safe, how will we respond? We are not told how the half-dead Jew responds when he wakes up in Jericho. We’re not even told how the lawyer responds when Jesus tells him to go and do what he now realizes he can never possibly do. That’s because it’s not relevant. The question is now about us. This is what Christ has done. We didn’t ask him to do it – how could we? Not a single one of us asked Jesus to go to the cross for us. Had we been there we would have either tried to stop him from going or helped nail him up there.

If you come to the point in life when, by God’s grace, you recognize that you are more like the half-dead man in the ditch than you might ever dare imagine, but also recognize that Christ treats you like the Samaritan treated that man in ways far beyond what you might ever dare hope, then you are in the place where you have found eternal life, not only someday after you die but even now as you live. You will come alive, begin to find an abundance of life on this side of the grave that will increasingly resemble the eternal life you will know in fullness someday on the other side of the grave.

And here’s the kicker. Listen to me. Once you come to know the love of Christ, to truly believe that he has loved you in this way, and then in response place your whole life in his hands as an act of faith, he will come into your life and begin, by his grace, to teach you how to love like this as well. Not all at once, but increasingly over time you will begin to love the Lord

your God with all heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor, even the one you now hate, as you love yourself. Not as a way to justify yourself, but as a natural result of a justification that was an utter gift to you, nothing but grace. As we read in 1st John 4, **“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God.”⁷**

What must you do to inherit eternal life? Nothing. It’s already been done for you. Now it is simply a question of whether or not you believe it, not just with your head but with your life.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 10:25-37. Though it’s a familiar text and parable, try to see it with fresh eyes. What stands out to you that you never noticed before?
2. Luke tells us that the lawyer stood up to *test* Jesus. What was the test? Who is really testing whom in this story?
3. How would you answer the lawyer’s question: What must I do to inherit eternal life?
4. If eternal life is gained by loving God with all heart, soul, strength and mind and loving all our neighbors as we love ourselves, what are the chances of you inheriting eternal life?
5. How would the parable have made a different point if the third person who helped the dying man had been a Jew rather than a Samaritan?
6. Where are you in this parable of the Good Samaritan? Where is God?
7. How does Jesus’ message here change you once you believe it? What is it that Christ is saying to you personally through it today?

⁶ Isaiah 61:1-3, NRSV. Jesus quoted them in Luke 4:16-30.

⁷ I John 4:7-8, NRSV

8. I John 4:7-8 declares, “**Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God.**”
What does this mean?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Who is who in the story of the Good Samaritan?
Where are you in the story? Where is God?