

Living in the Light of Eternity

Mark 10:17-31

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 13, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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.” ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹ Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Mark 10:17-31, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Let me begin this morning with a question that everybody is asking. And I mean everybody. In one form or another we are all asking this question: How do I get the most out of life? I’ve got one life to live, how do I make sure I get the most out of it? I want to live as long as possible and, at the same time, as well as possible.

I did a survey of recent magazine covers, the sorts you see in the rack as your waiting in the check-out line at the grocery store. It struck me how many magazine cover stories are asking this question in one form or another. *Cosmopolitan* asks, “Are you letting your dream life get away?” Good question. What *are* your dreams in life? And are you on a path to realizing them? *Time Magazine* asks, “Are you mom enough?” In other words, are you maximizing your potential as a parent? It’s a concern for those of us with kids. *Money* magazine asks, “What is the best place in America to live?” They suggest that if you moved your family to the little town of Apex, North Carolina, you’d be getting a lot more out of life than you are now. A recent cover of *The Oprah Magazine* asks, “How can you transform your luck, habits, stress level, friendships, health, style and attitude...and have fun doing it?” Oprah has diagnosed that at least some of us are currently failing to get the most out of every single area of our lives.

With questions like this on the cover of every magazine, by the time you finally make it through the check-out line you’ve been convinced that you are a long way off from getting the most out of your life. As if we needed convincing. You see, most of us have long had a sense that there is meant to be something more to this life. Quantitatively, we want the most we can get. We hope for a long life, as many years as possible before we die and then, if possible, life after we die. Qualitatively, we also want the best we can get. After all, what good is a long life unless it’s a good life? So even those who don’t believe that there is anything beyond this world strive to maximize their quantity and quality of life while they’re here.

Which brings me to the story we just read. When we meet this man who catches Jesus that day on his way out of town, we are meeting a man who is simply asking the same question we all are asking. How do I get the most out of life? Here’s the way he puts it, “**Good teacher,**” he asks Jesus, “**what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” His question infers that he’s not only asking how to find a quantity of life but also a quality of life, for who would want to live forever

if you lived forever in agony? He's asking our question, and so we would be wise to pay attention to the answer he receives.

Before we get to the answer, however, a word about this man. Since his story is also included in two other Gospels¹, we know that this man is young, and wealthy and in some position of authority. In fact, sometimes he's referred to as the rich, young ruler. We also know that he was sincere in his question. In other words, he wasn't like a lot of the other haters in those days who brought questions to Jesus which were meant to trap him or discredit him. This man runs up to Jesus and kneels before him to ask his question. Like a lot of other people then and now, he senses that Jesus might be somebody who can help him answer this ultimate question of life.

Remember that the Jews in those days were anxiously awaiting God's Messiah, a Savior they believed God would send to usher in a life where everything would finally be made new, and fresh, and free from corruption, decay, evil, bitterness, pain, fear and death.² They longed for this promised day when everything would be set right again in the world, when people would finally live at peace with God and one another, a life where each day was better than the next. It's fair to assume that this man had seen enough of Jesus to make him wonder if perhaps this rabbi from Nazareth was the One God had sent to bring the life he and others we're waiting for.

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What must *I* do?” he asks. In his question we hear his assumption that he has what it takes within himself to bring about this life, if only he can learn from Jesus the secret for doing so. This shouldn't surprise us. He's young, and youth often creates the illusion of invincibility. He's also rich and probably used to being able to buy whatever he wants or needs. And since he's powerful, he's not accustomed to anybody standing in his way as he does so. Who knows, maybe he's thinking to himself, “Even God must have a price. Surely I have something I can offer in exchange for eternal life.”³

Instead of giving him an immediate answer to his question, however, Jesus does what he often does and responds first with a question of his own. **“Why do you call me good?”** he asks. **“No one is good but God alone.”** In other words, since only God is good, if you think I'm good then you must think I'm God? Furthermore, if you're not God, then clearly you are not good. With his question Jesus is giving the man a hint about the answer he will eventually give him. Specifically, he's hinting to this rich, young ruler that in spite of his youth, his wealth, his power, and even his goodness, he is mistaken if he assumes that he has within him what it will take to secure eternal life for himself.

Without waiting for the man's response to his question, Jesus then gives what appears, at first, to be an answer to man's question. How do you inherit eternal life? **“You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’”** By listing some of the 10 Commandments here, Jesus is suggesting that eternal life is inherited by the one who keeps God's law. After all, since the law is given for our benefit, if you keep the law you will experience a great *quality* of life. If you cheat on your wife, kill people, become a thief, and refuse to tell the truth, life will generally not go well for you. Furthermore, if you keep the law you will experience a great *quantity* of life because why wouldn't God give life after death as a reward to those who obey him.

Well, the man's response to this is stunning. **“Teacher** [notice, he drops the 'good' part], **all these I have kept from my youth.**” Really? He's kept *all* the commandments since he was a boy? Actually, I think he's being sincere here. Like other faithful Jews of his day, he likely had committed all the energies of his life to following the Torah. He probably hadn't ever murdered anybody, or slept with any woman besides his wife. He's likely not a thief or a liar or a gossip. He probably respected his parents when he was younger and now provides for them in their old age.

Comparatively, when he holds up his life to the lives of others around him, he probably does come off looking pretty good. You might be able to do the same thing with your life. Fact it, churches are filled with people who believe that they are living very moral lives when compared to others they see around them. Of course, that's not only true of Christians. There are some hardcore atheists out there who, when compared to certain others, even certain others in the church, come across as quite kind, generous, and compassionate people.

¹ Matthew 19:16-26 & Luke 18:18-23

² I'm borrowing some language here from N.T. Wright in *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 216.

³ Dale Bruner suggests this wonderful question in *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 288.

So where do we draw the line? If the life we all long to have is dependent, as Jesus seems to suggest it is, on *our* goodness, on *our* following God's law, then how do we know if and when we have done enough? Who among us is good enough and who among us is not good enough? The question makes some of us nervous. It made this young man nervous. Do you see that? He's followed the law as closely as anybody. He's kept the commandments *since he was a boy!* And yet here he is, racing up to Jesus and falling to his knees to ask him what he still has to do to inherit eternal life! He's a lot like some of us. Deep down, some of us are still anxiously wondering whether or not at the end of the day we have done enough to merit the life we long for.

In the end, you see, this man is lost. He's lost and he's desperate. In spite of all his law-keeping, his youth, his wealth, his power, he has no certain assurance that in the end he will get the most out of life. And in response Jesus looks at him in disgust. Right? No. Jesus looks at this lost man and loves him. It's my favorite part of the whole story because, remember, this man is us. He's asking our question. Like us, he doesn't know what he needs to do to find the life he suspects Jesus has to offer. And Jesus' response, to him and to us, is not one of disgust or disappointment or scorn, but simply love. Jesus loves us and so Jesus wants the best for us.

And it is in that moment that Jesus, motivated by love, finally gives this rich, young, law-abiding ruler an answer to his question. **“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’”** The man lacks just *one* thing. Not three things. Not 12 things. Not fifty things. Just *one* thing. He's so close! Go home and hold an estate sale. Sell every last thing you own and give all the proceeds to the poor. Then leave your former life behind and come and be my disciple. In other words, to find this life you seek you don't really have to *do* anything; you just have to *let go* of everything. From this day forward, let me lead your life. Give me control. Come to me just as you are, stripped of everything you have, and go with me where I am going. This is the answer Jesus gives him to his question. And all at once it is the simplest and hardest answer in the world. Simple to understand. Very, very difficult to accept.

You see, Jesus knew this man's heart, as he knows all human hearts. And he saw in this man's heart the same thing he sees in every human heart. In the very core of his being, at the very root of his search for the best in life, for ultimate security, identity and meaning in life, this man, like every other man or woman, had trusted in something else other than God to deliver that life to him. In his case it was his wealth. As happens so often in this world, his material possessions had become for him the imagined source of the quality and quantity of the life for which he longed. But not only his wealth, also his own goodness. He had come to imagine that if he was able to keep God's law, to conform the morality of his life to God's expectations, then in the end God would owe him the reward of eternal life. Do you see that? His own goodness had become for him, along with his wealth, the imagined source of the life he longed to possess.

Jesus' one command addresses both these idols. “Give up your wealth. Show me that you trust me more than you trust your money. Then come after me. Just come as you are. You don't need to prove anything, just come and follow me. Trust that the source of eternal life is my goodness, not yours.”

Here's the question. Does Jesus give this same answer to everybody? Does Jesus require everybody to give up their wealth to find eternal life? That's the question lots of people ask when they read this story. And the short answer is no. In fact, this is the only occasion in the Gospels where we see Jesus tell somebody to give away all their stuff. Even so, if wealth has become your idol, your imagined source of security, identity and purpose in life, then there's a good chance Jesus might ask of you the same thing he asked of this young man. As one commentator put it, “That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command.”⁴

The point is that if you go to Jesus seeking life, you may not get the exact same instructions this man got. Still, the instructions you do get will likely be just as easy to understand and just as difficult to follow. Jesus knows your heart, as he knows mine. He knows you long for life, for a quality and quantity of life you have not yet experienced but know is meant to be. As Ecclesiastes 3:11 declares, **“God has set eternity in our hearts.”** Jesus knows we were made for more than this.

But Jesus also knows that too often you have set your heart on something other than him to provide such life. Like this young man, it might be wealth and the material comforts of this world. It is for lots of people. It might also be your

⁴ R.H. Gundry, as cited by Dale Bruner, 297.

own goodness. Many of us, I'm certain, have come to believe that if we are good enough people, then God will give us life in the end. For others of you it might be your reputation, what others think of you. For some it is family, or career, or knowledge. Idols, in and of themselves, are not necessarily bad things. Rather, idols are good things which we make into ultimate things, created things we worship in place of the Creator.

So here's the question. How will Jesus answer your request for eternal life? The answer you get likely won't be exactly the same as the answer I get. Since he knows the thing you tend to trust more than him, he will ask you to let go of that thing completely. There will be no half way. It's like a woman who says to a man, "If you want to be my husband you cannot give half your heart to me and half your heart to your other lover; it's all or nothing." In the same way, Jesus will ask for it all. But if you do what he asks, if you let go of what he tells you to let go of, if you turn and trust him alone for life, then you will eventually discover that whatever you give up will pale in comparison to that which you gain.

Consider this rope.⁵ This rope is your life, not just your life on this earth but your life for eternity. Your life had a beginning, just like mine. But though your life had a definite beginning, it has no end. Did you know that? Remember, eternity has been set in every human heart. The human soul is everlasting. So imagine this rope stretching on and on into eternity, circling the globe over and over and over again. That is your life.

Now this part, these few inches at the beginning⁶, this is your life now, these 70, 80, 90 years you walk this earth. And this part, for many of us, can be full of joy and goodness and beauty. Life in the here and now can be very, very good. But this same part, for all of us, will also contain plenty of hardship. Our beautiful world is full of pain, and heartache, and sickness, and evil, and fear, and decay, and death. But the promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that because God, through his Son Jesus, has entered into this part of life and given his own life as a sacrifice on the cross, but then was raised again to resurrected life at Easter, because of what God has done in Christ everything in this life that is not right has now been set right in eternity. A new reality is breaking through in this world and there will come a day when our already-defeated two great enemies of sin and death will be forever vanquished. All that separates us from the life we sense we were made for has been overcome in Christ. Through Christ, all has been set right. It is finished. And not only in eternity, but we see glimpses of this even now, in this life. It is only a matter of time until all this will be fully realized.

Here is even better news. This life is ours. The abundant and eternal life the rich, young ruler asks Jesus about is his and ours for the taking. If we would only do what Jesus tells the rich, young ruler he should do. If we would be willing to forsake all else and place our ultimate trust in him and him alone, then this life is ours. Nothing else can provide this life – only Christ! No worldly thing – not money, or career, or reputation, or knowledge, or family. It cannot be gained through our own goodness because the standard for a goodness-meriting eternal life is the very righteousness of God. And though we may fancy ourselves good compared to others, we will never come off as such when compared to the holiness and righteousness of God. But in Christ this life is ours if only we would place our faith in him.

The choice is easy, right? You'd think so. But when this rich, young ruler hears this good news from Jesus what does he do? Tragically we read, "**When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.**" Do you see the grave mistake he is making? He's holding on to this part of life [the first few inches of the rope] so tightly that he is forsaking the rest of life. And though nobody in their right mind would make such a choice, there are so many people in this world, perhaps some of us, who are not in our right minds.

C.S. Lewis once famously described this world in its present state as the "shadowlands." By that he meant that all the goodness of this life is merely a shadow of the real thing which, one day, we shall know fully in eternity. Furthermore, it is all that is wrong with this life which has made all that is right only a shadow. Lewis writes, "Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly. For all that can be shaken will be shaken and only the unshakable remains."⁷ When it comes to life, who in their right mind would forsake the real thing for a mere shadow of itself?

Yet so many do. Because we cling so tightly to the things of this world, Jesus' call to us, through remarkably clear, is remarkably difficult to heed. As he watches the young man walk away downtrodden, Jesus acknowledges as much,

⁵ I once heard Francis Chan use a similar analogy in a sermon.

⁶ Just a few inches on this rope which stretches on to infinity.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Collier Books, 1946), 69.

saying, **“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”** Said another way, how hard it is for those holding tightly to this shadow life to enter into the real life Jesus has prepared for them. In response, his disciples rightly ask, **“Then who can be saved?”**

Jesus’ answer? **“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”** You see, the man’s question was off from the get go. It’s not what *we do* to gain eternal life but what God, through Christ, has *already done* that makes this possible. All we must do is have faith. Which sounds easy, but it may be the hardest thing we ever do.

Still, if we loosen our grip on the shadow of earthly life, we will eventually inherit the real thing in the life that is to come, and even begin to taste that life in the here and now. If we forsake trying to find our security, our identity, and our meaning in the things of this world, and trust Christ instead, we will eventually see that all along he has been the only one who can give us these things and make them permanently unshakable in our lives. If we let go of our vain efforts to make ourselves good enough and give ourselves as we are to Christ, we will find that his resurrected life will fill us and begin to make us into good people who, by the power of the Spirit, can finally actually begin to live in ways that are pleasing to God. If we would just loosen our grip on this small part of the rope, we will discover that the rope continues on with no end.

As Jesus told his disciples, **“There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”**

As we begin to live in the light of eternity, to handle this small part of the rope in light of the rest of the rope, we find that we can still enjoy the goodness of this life but we hold it more loosely because we know it is just a shadow, a foretaste, of the real thing. We also find that we can hold loosely to the trouble of this life as well, knowing that no matter what hardships we face in life they are only passing. As Paul writes in II Corinthians 4, **“For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”**⁸

As I close let me point out that this story, like many stories in the Gospels, ends without resolution. We’re told that the man walks away full of sorrow but we are not told what he ultimately decides to do. Who knows, maybe he knew at that point that he would never be able to bring himself to let go of his wealth and was distraught because that meant he knew he would never find the life he longed to have. On the other hand, maybe he went home and considered Jesus’ words and, by God’s grace, ultimately realized the choice before him was easy and obvious. After all, only a fool holds onto what he cannot keep and, in doing so, forsakes that which he can never lose.

Either way, the lack of resolution at the end of this story is intentional because, once again, the man is us. His question is our question. His desire for life is our desire for life. The response Jesus is waiting for is our response.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus says to us. “Just one. Let go of those couple inches of rope. In and of themselves they will not give you what you hope they will give you. Then come and follow me and discover that the fullness of life, beginning now but stretching on forever, will be yours.”

I’ll give you this, such a step of faith is not easy. But remember, with God all things are possible.

Amen.

⁸ II Corinthians 4:17-18, NRSV

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Are you sure you are getting the most out of life? Or do you have a sense that you were made for something more?
2. Read Mark 10:17-31 again. What first sticks out to you from this story?
3. When the young man asks Jesus about eternal life, Jesus reminds him of the 10 Commandments. Why? What connection is Jesus suggesting exists between eternal life and obeying God's law?
4. Jesus' ultimate answer to the man's question about eternal life is that he needs to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him. Is Jesus asking too much? Too little?
5. What would you do if Jesus asked the same of you?
6. If you asked Jesus the same question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", what do you think he would say to you in response?
7. Think about the rope analogy Jeff used. What did that analogy help you to realize about your life?
8. Consider again Paul's words in II Corinthians 4:17-18: "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." Where is the good news here?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Do you think it was fair that Jesus asked this man to give up everything?