

WHAT SHALL I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

On Monday Shann Nix wrote an article for the San Francisco Chronicle called "The Serious Side of the City's Santa:"

For 25 years, Santa Claus has been delivering mail in the San Francisco hills. On Christmas Eve morning, he gets up at quarter to 4 and puts on his red suit...he shoulders his pack...and starts on his rounds. He's a big man, more than six feet tall, big-bellied and solidly built. His eyes are brown and deeply creased with smile lines at the corners. His face is broad, and kind, and leathery, and his hair's as white as ice. [When you see him]...you know it is Santa, the essence of magic and faith and sleepless excitement, or else everything you've ever believed is a lie.

He has an everyday name, but he prefers not to use it. "Let them believe," he says. "Santa Claus is a magical, mystical being. When I wear this suit, people tell me...the wish of their heart." ...he visits San Francisco General Hospital's AIDS Ward... Once when he walked into the AIDS Ward he saw a young man in a kimono...talking on the phone. When the young man turned around, Santa could see that his face and body were covered with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, cancerous sores common to AIDS patients. "Oh, my God, it's Santa," the young man said into the phone. "I have to go." He hung up the phone. Then he said, "Santa, will you hug me?" "Hey, what is Santa for?" he said, and opened his arms. The young man cried, he said, for a long time. "They never touch us here," he said. "No one ever touches us. All the nurses wear rubber gloves."

Santa makes his rounds in the ward every year, giving out the small toys and animals that he buys with money he saves from working overtime. He touches every patient. A young man who was dying said, "Give me my life. You can do it. You're Santa, you can do anything. I'm only 23." "What do you tell them?" he says, wiping his eyes and blowing his nose on a huge red bandanna. "I say, 'You got to have hope. Faith. You got to believe. You got to try.'"

According to this article, Santa Claus (old Saint Nicholas), this mixture of magic, myth, and religious goodness, is offering mankind a hopeless, faithless and despairing gospel and, in doing so, is replacing in the minds of fallen humanity the true meaning of Christmas: the incarnation. Remember that in Matthew 1:20-21 Joseph had been struggling with how to deal with his fiancée Mary and the fact that she was with child when the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying to him: "...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."

This same Jesus, God in the flesh, was not only willing to be born in a borrowed manger; but he was willing to go to the cross for our sins, so that after his death and resurrection he could offer to all of suffering humanity, through his church, his wonderful message of salvation and the gift of eternal life. And we know we can have eternal life: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The night before our Lord went to the cross he prayed: "Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee, even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom Thou hast given Him, He may give eternal life. And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." (John 17:1-3.) Eternal life is a gift from God given to all men and women at the moment they place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Eternal life consists of not only eternal

time but an eternal loving relationship with our Lord as well as a wholesome life filled with love, joy, righteousness, peace and eternal purpose.

It appears, according to this article, that Santa Claus is getting to the suffering world first these days, and he is offering these people a form of life. But his message and ministry fall far short of the life that God in Christ is willing to offer to each and every man, woman and child. For Jesus is the only one who can offer all of us the deepest wish of our heart: eternal and abundant life.

Luke 10:25-37 is a passage of scripture that will either confirm that you already possess your gift of eternal life or challenge you to want to ask Jesus for the gift of eternal life. A Jewish teacher asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" I hope some of you will be asking the same question as we look at this passage together.

I. Love the Lord with all your heart, Luke 10:25-28

Our Lord is in his final months of life and ministry on earth before the shadow of the cross, which has fallen across his path since the incarnation, will become a painful reality. In the month of October he and his disciples had quietly attended the Feast of Tabernacles, and he had taught in the temple. There the scribes and Pharisees were seeking to take his life on the charge of blasphemy, because he had stated, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58), thus declaring that he and the Father are one. But he hid himself and then left the temple and the city of Jerusalem and went down into the hilly countryside around the holy city called Judea. However, the Pharisees continued to try to trap our Lord by having public theological debates with the hope that he would slip up and "hang himself" before the crowds. So enter stage right, take number one: A certain scribe or lawyer, well-versed in the Mosaic law as well as in the Jewish tradition, challenges Jesus publicly:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "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." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

The canon law expert put our Lord on his level by addressing him as Teacher, or Rabbi, an expert on the Law of Moses. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life" (or what must I do to enter the Messiah's kingdom)? Here was a classic example of the Jewish mindset at this time: salvation by works. "Teacher, is there some new law I could keep or some special work project I could do which would qualify me to inherit eternal life?" Note that at no time did he mention sin or guilt. Note also that this lawyer was wrapping himself in a thin disguise of self-righteousness when he asked, "What shall I do...", which suggested that once the Lord told him, he could just do it and then inherit eternal life. But the Law of God was given to Israel through Moses to reveal the holiness of God and the demands that he made on those who would walk in fellowship with him. It was given to produce knowledge of sin. It had no power to produce righteousness; it just pointed out that man wasn't righteous. Its demands could never be kept in the flesh, but human pride blinded the minds of the Jews so that each time they read the Law they told themselves they could keep it (2 Corinthians 3:13-14). So the lawyer was asking Jesus, "What law should I work on?"

In response, the Lord asked the lawyer a question: "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" He was asking him to summarize the Law. Now, every Jew knew that the greatest commandment was found in Deuteronomy 6, and this lawyer was no exception. In its fuller context they would say in the synagogue each Sabbath: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And 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." Then he added, "and [you shall love] your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18.) In another confrontation with the Pharisees on the same subject the Lord added, "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:34-40.) Many orthodox Jews wore little leather boxes on their wrists which contained verses from Deuteronomy 6:4-9. These two commandments demonstrate to all mankind in every generation that

eternal life comes from a relationship with the one and only living God, and it is out of that love relationship that we are empowered by the Spirit of God to love ourselves as well as our neighbors.

Jesus responded to the lawyer, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." The answer was correct, but the trouble with this plan of obtaining eternal life was that no one in his own strength could ever live up to the spiritual requirements of the Law. One slip brings failure. It is not obedience to the Law that rewards a man with eternal life, but his faith in God that makes him acceptable. And God then places that Law in his heart and gives him the spiritual desire and power to fulfill it on a daily basis (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The Jews knew this spiritual principle was given to Abraham some 400 years before the Law when God saw that Abraham trusted in him to fulfill all his promises in the covenant God made with him. The apostle Paul would comment later in Romans 4:2-4: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" (Genesis 15:6.) But when we don't have a personal relationship with God and his Son Jesus Christ, then we remain dead in our sin.

How many times have you heard an unbelieving friend, neighbor, or co-worker say at this season, "I wish we could keep the spirit of Christmas all year long"? The real problem is that mankind without a loving relationship with the Son of God is incapable of maintaining a genuine loving relationship with anyone else, including himself. But each year fallen humanity keeps trying to crank out one more Christmas season full of love and joy: "Ho, ho, ho." And each year there is less and less emphasis on the real message of Christmas: that God sent his Son Jesus to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. But more and more emphasis is placed on commercializing the season as symbolized this year by the postal worker in a Santa suit who offered a despairing gospel to a dying man who cried out, "Give me my life. You can do it. You're Santa, you can do anything!" Santa's response? "You got to have hope. Faith. You got to believe, you got to try." What did he say? Nothing at all! This young man will die in his sins if he reaches out to a god who doesn't exist and can't give him the life he wants.

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? 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 (here's the tough one)...

II. Love your neighbor as yourself, Luke 10:29-37

How do we do that? When we place our faith in God, then he comes and dwells in us, and his love begins to flow through us. As we get a view of who God is and as we see that it is only by grace we are saved, then he floods our hearts with his life, and we see who we are as new creatures in Christ. Then, because we have a high view of who we are, we can reach out to others in genuine love. But let's look at how the story unfolds:

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Now the lawyer who could quote the Old Testament Law found himself in a place where he was being condemned by the Law, for once he reviewed the Law he knew as we all know that we can't love God fully in our own power. So he knew at that moment that he did not possess eternal life. He was in trouble. And to make matters worse, he wasn't quite sure who his neighbor was. For in the Jew's mind his neighbor could never be a Gentile, but would have to be someone from the Jewish race; but beyond that who would it be? For some taught not just that it was a fellow Israelite you should love, but specifically that the Israelite must be a

Pharisee. Further, a Jewish sect called the Essenes living in the Qumran caves said that anyone who did not belong to their group was to be called a son of darkness and hated. So the lawyer was trying to quiet his own heart and conscience and put our Lord on the spot.

The Lord answered the lawyer's question with a parable. As we have seen before, our Lord used parables to open hearts or close hearts to spiritual truth. In this case he appeared to be willing to let some new light into this spiritual teacher's life. He captured his attention by telling him a story that we now call "The Good Samaritan." It is filled with spiritual instruction.

In the beginning of the story, it appears that a certain man (assumed Jewish) was returning to his home in Jericho after visiting Jerusalem. In order to get home he had to leave the holy city and walk eastward some 17 miles down the notoriously dangerous Jericho road, which was surrounded with hills and valleys and lots of caves that could be used by robbers lying in wait for their victims. This man for some reason knew of the dangers and yet compounded matters for himself by traveling alone. Then the worst-case scenario occurred: "and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him and went off leaving him half dead."

I've traveled that road many times, and they still don't have a place where you can dial 911 for emergencies, so the semiconscious nude Jew remained alongside the Jericho road. The road is not that wide, so no one could miss a nude Jew lying there. Then who should come along but a certain priest, a man selected by the Lord as a mediator between him and his people, who had just served God Almighty in the temple in Jerusalem and was now returning to his home in Jericho where many of the priests and Levites lived. He was very familiar with the Law, very familiar with Deuteronomy 6, with the commandments to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Yet as he came upon this half dead, nude fellow Jew he looked at him, then took in the immediate surroundings, and decided he couldn't get involved (Leviticus 22:1-9): "...he passed by on the other side." So much for loving your neighbor as yourself. "And likewise a Levite also..." During the wilderness journey the Lord set aside the whole tribe of Levi to serve alongside the priests in the tabernacle and then in the temple. (Numbers 8). Among their many responsibilities they were called upon to preserve the Law of the Lord in all its integrity and purity and see to it that its requirements were duly complied with (Leviticus). Apparently this Levite was on the same shift as the priest, so he too was going down the Jericho road toward his home when he saw the half dead, nude fellow Jew and passed by on the other side. Once again, so much for loving your neighbor as yourself.

At the end of the story, we don't know how much time has passed, but the beaten and half dead nude Jew is still lying by the side of the road. Now I'm sure that the Jewish lawyer was listening to the Jewish teacher tell him about the half dead Jew and the irresponsible acts of the Jewish priest and Levite and all the time quietly shaking his head and saying "I understand we do have our problems when it comes to defining our neighbors, and you have just proved it again, Jesus. You can't believe everybody, can you?" But then the Lord arrested the lawyer's attention, for he spoke of the arrival of a certain Samaritan. "But a certain Samaritan..."

The Samaritan race began shortly after the Assyrian invasion of northern Israel and the destruction of the capital city of Samaria in 721 BC. The Assyrians took some 27,290 Jews into captivity and replaced many of them with their own people, who shortly intermarried with the remaining Jewish community. Not only were the children of these unions of mixed blood, but also the new generation found their religious values were a mixture of Judaism and paganism. The first real discord between the Jews and the Samaritans occurred when they came to the priest Ezra in 450 BC as he was calling the returned Babylonian captives back to the Law of Moses and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. They wanted to help rebuild the temple, but Ezra refused their help (Ezra 4). They had mortgaged their inheritance, so to speak, by getting mixed up in pagan practices. The temple in Jerusalem was set aside to worship God in all purity. So the Jews kept Jerusalem as their center of worship, while the Samaritans worshipped in their temple on Mount Gerizim just outside their ancient capital of Samaria. The hatred between these two races continued to grow until the days of our Lord and remains even today.

But a certain Samaritan offered mercy and love in nine tangible and costly ways: (1) He saw the wounded man on the side of the road, and something was allowed to happen to his heart. (2) He felt compassion; he identified with him at that moment out of a heart of love. (3) He came toward him, taking his own life in his hands because he had no knowledge that the robbers had really left the area. And as he came toward him he

realized that this half dead man was a Jew and his sworn enemy. (4) He bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. (5) He put him on his own beast, and led him as he himself walked, looking for a place of refuge. (6) He brought him to an inn, curtailing his own plans and journey. (7) He took personal care of him and then stayed the night to make sure he was going to live. (8) He gave the innkeeper two denarii (two days' wages), asked him to watch out for him for the next couple of days, and told him if it cost more he would repay him. (9) He planned to return. In short, he went way out of his way to minister to someone who was his enemy. The Samaritans studied the five books of Moses, so this man would have known the commandments of Deuteronomy 6. This story suggests that this Samaritan had placed his faith in Jehovah, and it was by his indwelling power this man was able to show such mercy.

Jesus asked the lawyer in light of his story, "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"

The lawyer responded: the one (he couldn't say Samaritan) who showed mercy toward him. It is obvious that the Samaritan had a personal relationship with God, and because of that relationship, he was able to reach out to his needy enemy with the mercy of God. Then the Lord said for the second time, "Go and do the same." The problem was that the lawyer knew he was spiritually bankrupt on two accounts: He couldn't love God, and he couldn't love his neighbor.

Behind all such real stories are levels of spiritual truths that will help us in our spiritual growth and understanding of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as well as of our own hearts and actions. It is easy to see the spiritual picture in which the half dead beaten Jew represents the nation of Israel, a people who had been not only greatly ripped off by the Romans but also neglected by their own shepherds. The good Samaritan, on a spiritual level, is a beautiful picture of Jesus, who was despised and rejected by the Jewish leadership and even called a Samaritan by them (John 8:48), and who, because of his loving relationship with his Father, willingly came to this world to extend love and mercy to us in our horrible condition. He was the true Good Samaritan.

The religious lawyer had asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The Lord responded by reminding him as well as all of us that eternal life is not given to men and women based on some religious activity, but eternal life is the fruit of establishing a loving relationship with the one and only living God, and now we know his name is Jesus. Once that relationship is established by faith and not by works, the Lord fills our lives with himself and his love and enables us to not only love him fully but then to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Who is our neighbor? Our neighbor is the very next hurting person we meet, whether friend or enemy. And what are we to do with the neighbor in trouble? (1) Don't try to do the same thing the Samaritan did unless you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. For you will be trying to perform some good work out of the flesh. You will remain as spiritually bankrupt as that lawyer who was hoping that eternal life could be acquired by doing a good work. (2) But if you have a personal relationship with Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then your heart is already filled with his love, mercy, and power to choose to become involved in the life of the next hurting neighbor.

What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Stop believing that Santa Claus can give it to you. Stop believing that you can do something to receive it. ("For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." Ephesians 2:8-9.) Start believing that God came to this world by the incarnation so that he could save us from our sins, and that if you place your faith in Jesus as the only Savior this world will ever have, He will save you by his grace and mercy and immediately give you the gift of eternal life. The moment we are willing to declare our spiritual bankruptcy, we inherit eternal life! The greatest wish of our hearts becomes real.

"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. Do this and you will live." With full dependence on the Lord in whom you have placed your faith, ask him to allow his eternal love, mercy, and life to flow out of you toward the next person you meet in physical, emotional, or spiritual trouble. This life is a gift that keeps breaking up so that others can receive it, too! What a great season we have to walk among the AIDS patients,

homeless, orphans, and widows. We need to ask God to give us his eyes and heart to offer them the opportunity to receive life forever in fellowship with him.

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