

HOW CAN WE RECEIVE ETERNAL LIFE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Last Thursday evening, Eff Martin and I went to dinner at the Stanford Mall, just before our elders meeting. We needed to go over some final details concerning our responsibilities at the Men's Retreat. We were given a nice table by our waiter, and as we began to look over the retreat schedule we found we were sitting next to a beautiful young couple who, we learned later, were attending Stanford University. They were involved in a passionate conversation about their love relationship. We tried not to listen as we worked on our schedule, but that was next to impossible. It soon became apparent that the girl was trying to break off the relationship, but the young man was trying to hold on to it. It was also quite apparent that there was no spiritual basis to their relationship. By the end of our meal, but certainly not the end of their conversation, I realized once again the crying need for each and every one of us to be the "salt and light" that Christians should be in their community. I wanted so much to say to both of them that, rather than centering their lives on themselves and on their emotional and physical needs, what they needed was to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Then they would be given the gift of eternal life and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and they would have the scriptures to encourage and direct them in their relationship. So I broke into their conversation and said, "Excuse me. We could not help but hear what you were talking about. As a pastor and counselor, I want to commend both of you on your ability to communicate. And as a pastor, I would be happy to marry you if that is what you really want. The young man yelled "Yes!", and the girl threw her head back, hid her eyes with her hand and said, "Oh, no!" As we left to go to our elders meeting, I hugged the young man. My heart filled up with love for both of them. I knew that at that moment I had the words of eternal life in Jesus Christ, words they needed so much. All I could hope for was that we would meet again so that I could share that good news.

And that is the same good news that our Lord shared throughout his life, as we have been seeing in these studies in the gospel of Luke. In chapter 18, verses 15-34, to which we come today, we will find that the crowd surrounding Jesus is growing, but the subject under discussion, the kingdom of God, remained the same. Who is the King and how does one get into his kingdom and enjoy its spiritual and material benefits? This is the question every human being in every generation should be asking before our Lord Jesus returns to this earth in judgment. Today, Jesus will answer this eternal question once again as he is confronted by several parents and also a rich young ruler. How can we receive eternal life?

I. We must have a child-like heart

Luke18:15-17

And they were bringing even their babies to Him, in order that He might touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, "Permit the children to come to Me, and stop hindering them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all."

Jesus and his disciples are in Perea, on the east side of the Jordan River. He is on the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem, where he will die for the sins of mankind. The crowds continue to gather around him and his teaching on the kingdom of God, following his declaration to the Pharisees, "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (17:21). He was telling the Pharisees, and all others who were open to hear, that entry into the spiritual kingdom was possible for all who placed their faith in him as their Messiah. We now know that our risen Lord is spiritually in our midst, offering salvation to all who believe in him as the Son of God and Savior of the world. He also told his listeners that his second coming would be visible to the world. At that time he would come in judgment and set up his physical kingdom on earth (17:22-37). He warned his disciples, however,

that difficult days would prevail between the cross and his second coming, so that "at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (18:1-14). According to Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12, Jesus then took on the Pharisees over the issue of divorce (before the parents and children began to approach him for a blessing, as we have read above).

"And they were bringing even their babies to Him, in order that He might touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them" (Matt.19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16). The Pharisees had rejected the King and his spiritual kingdom, but several parents saw something of deity in the life and manner of Jesus. They moved closer to him, hoping that he might touch and bless their children. It must have been a wonderful moment for Jesus. We can imagine the little ones touching his face and his hair, while a little girl tried to sit on his lap, without any sense of fear. In the midst of this "heaven on earth" scene, several of the disciples took it upon themselves to try and send the children and their parents always from the presence of the Messiah. We are not told why, but perhaps they thought they were protecting Jesus from the children so that he could be about the more important business of teaching the Pharisees and the other adults.

Notice Jesus' response: "But Jesus called for them saying, 'Permit the children to come to Me, and stop hindering them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all.'" Mark writes that when Jesus saw what his disciples were doing, he was "indignant" (greatly displeased, having a righteous anger). He wanted the children around him in order to teach two valuable spiritual lessons: 1) The kingdom of God belongs to such as these; and 2) one must receive the kingdom of God (Jesus), like a child who at a tender age opens his or her trusting heart, or they cannot experience eternal life. A child's heart is full of trust and faith in his loving parents. The moment a father or mother opens their arms, the beloved child comes running to them, for they know that they will be kissed and hugged and tickled and protected by their parents. Jesus wants all who wish to experience eternal life to have the same kind of trust and faith in him, the loving Son of God, who had come to the world to "seek and to save that which was lost" (19:10).

This past year I have been joyfully reminded of the delight of being with little children again as I spent time with my young grandchild, Rene' Charles. When I reach out my arms, he comes right into them. He spends a lot of time looking at my face and pulling my beard. Then he turns in my arms and begins to point at everything he sees, using his baby talk vocabulary to get me to take him over to whatever he wants to investigate. At no time is there any fear in our relationship because he has been surrounded by the love of his parents, and our relationship has been built on love and hugs and kisses. I love children. They are so wonderfully teachable. They are humble, they are honest, and they are trusting of others. This is what God is seeking for in those who would enter his kingdom-they must come with a humble and child-like faith.

How can we receive eternal life? We must come to Jesus with the trusting heart of a child, and

II. We must realize that eternal life is a gift from God

Luke 18:18-27

And a certain ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to obtain eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth." And when Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich. And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But He said, "The things impossible with men are possible with God."

This rich young ruler was child-like, but he was not willing to enter the kingdom of God. He asked Jesus a

question: "Good Teacher, what shall I do to obtain eternal life?" According to Mark 10:17, by this time our Lord had blessed the children and was about to continue his trip to Jerusalem when "...a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him ..." At this stage, all we know is that he was a young ruler (Matt. 19:20). As he listened to Jesus teach the crowd about the kingdom of God, he decided to approach him on a spiritual level. Thus he began his question with what he thought was a title of respect, "Good Teacher."

"Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone," responded Jesus. One of the characteristics of God is that he is the ultimate and final determination of what is good because he is good. David wrote in Psalms 28:8, "Good and upright is the Lord." In Psalm 86:5, he wrote, "For Thou, Lord, art good and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee." Jesus sought to arrest the attention of this young man, saying, in effect, "If you knew what you were really saying, you would realize that only God is good; so that if you call me good, then you are publicly recognizing my deity, that 'I and the Father are One.' If that is true, then, in answer to your question, 'What must I do to receive eternal life?' I assume that since you understand that I am God incarnate, you will do exactly what I ask you to do in order to inherit eternal life."

What did this rich young ruler mean by the words "eternal life"? We need to keep in mind that he was coming out of the Jewish religious culture. From childhood, the Jews were taught from the Torah that Jehovah was the one and only living eternal God and Father (Deut 33:27, Isa. 9:6). They had learned about eternal life from such verses as Daniel 12:1-2, concerning Israel and the end times, when the Lord appeared in a vision to his prophet Daniel: "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt." The Jews were familiar with the theological concept that during his life on this earth, man needs to get his name written in the book of life. After his death, his soul and spirit are resurrected to eternal joy, but if his name is not written in the book of life, he will spend eternity in disgrace and everlasting contempt. Jesus reminded the Jews of the same truth when he taught them of the last great judgment in which the King will divide the goats (unbelievers) and the sheep (believers). Then he told them that the goats "...will go away into eternal punishment (eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels), but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25). He also related to them the story of the "certain rich man and Lazarus" (Luke 16). So this rich young ruler was seeking peace of mind, hoping that he was going in the right spiritual direction; and if not, what could he do to make sure he was. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked. As a wealthy man, he was hoping to do something to assure his place in eternity.

Notice that Jesus does not review here in Luke's gospel (nor does he do so in Matthew or Mark), the first four commandments that have to do with our relationship with God, idolatry, taking God's name in vain, and keeping the Sabbath. Instead, he addresses the commandments that have to do with relationships with our fellow human beings. Matthew adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19-18). When a man is open to understanding and seeking to obey the law of God, he is well on his way to coming into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul would write to the Galatians, "But before faith came, we [Jews] were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor [school master] to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith" (3:23-24).

As the rich ruler listened to Jesus his heart must have been filled with hope. As he reviewed his life, he could, to the best of his understanding, say to Jesus, "All these things I have kept from my youth." Matthew says that Jesus responded, "If you wish to be complete ..." (19:21). Mark records, "And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him" (10:21). Notice that Jesus did not refute his statement. He addressed the deeper issue, because he saw that this young man had kept the law to the best of his understanding, shallow as it was, and that it still left him spiritually unfulfilled and uncertain of any real hope for eternal life. Jesus is saying, in other words, "Assuming that when you called me 'Good Teacher' you were addressing me as Messiah, God incarnate, will you then obey me when I tell you, 'One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasures in heaven; and come and follow Me?'" But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich," says our text. What the Lord saw was that, like the Pharisees, this young ruler had become a lover of money (16:14), and had broken the first commandment: "I am the Lord

your God...You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:1-17). Jesus had already told his disciples, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches." (16:13.) "And when he had heard these things, he became very sad [and went away grieved] for he was extremely rich [he owned much property]." He would like to have heard that he could lay up treasures in heaven while keeping his treasures on earth, but he did not realize that the treasures on earth had become his god. Satan had caught him in his net of greed, false security, and power, so that when he was challenged, he found he could not part with them. Thus he would face the final judgment at Christ's second coming.

"And Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!'" Note that Jesus is not saying that it is wrong to be rich. What he is saying is that for some men, and especially this rich man, riches become their idol. This man had become a lover of money instead of God. Paul wrote to Timothy: "...those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. But flee from these things, you man of God and pursue after [treasures in heaven, which are:] righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness." (1 Tim. 6:9-11.) "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," said Jesus. It seems there are as many views of this humorous proverb as there are camels in the Middle East. In light of the context, however, Jesus is simply saying that the task is humanly impossible.

The Jews believed that riches were a blessing from God, and those who were so blessed were given the best of this world as well as the next. They thought poverty was a punishment from God because of personal sin. But based on our Lord's teaching, this was no longer true, for he was saying that in this case money had become a stumbling block to the man's salvation. So all who heard Jesus' words reacted in dismay. "Then who can be saved?" they asked. Who can have eternal life? If this rich man, who has seemingly been blessed of God cannot be saved, what hope is there for common people? "The things impossible with men are possible with God," replied Jesus. Only God can break this Satanic spell. A rich man cannot buy or work his way into heaven. No man by his own power, personality, or position can get into the kingdom of God. Salvation is a gift of grace. One must be born again or born from above (John 3). As Paul told the Ephesians, "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." (Eph 2:8-9.)

Here Peter jumps in on behalf of the other disciples (28-30): "Behold, we have left our homes and followed you." In other words, "Lord, in light of what you said to the rich man about selling all that he had, you know, don't you, that we all did that, so will we get treasures in heaven?" Jesus had encouraged the disciples that if they truly left homes and families for the sake of the kingdom, they would be greatly blessed on this earth as well as in the age to come. According to Matt. 19: 28, at the time of the second coming, when Jesus will sit on his glorious throne, the disciples will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And, according to Mark 10:30, all who have left their homes and property in this world will receive a hundred times as much in this present age, along with persecution, and, in the age to come, eternal life.

I was reminded of this reality just last week. Several years ago, we had a man in this ministry who was extremely rich. He told everyone that he was a believer in Christ. The longer I knew him, the richer he became. And the richer he became, the more power he received. But in time, as Paul warned, "those who get rich fall into temptation and a snare, and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction." One day we were sitting at his beautiful pool at a neighborhood party in this community, and the following week he had disappeared. Within a few weeks I heard that he was running from the law because of dishonest business dealings. A few months later I visited him in jail where he was awaiting trial. He then jumped bail and disappeared, leaving his wife and family. He hid out in another country for a couple of years, but, as he said in a letter to a mutual friend, "the long arm of the law finally caught me." He is now serving time in a federal prison. His friends are praying that he will sincerely allow Jesus to be Lord so that he can be set free from the snare of riches as set by the evil one. Jesus said, "The things impossible with men are possible with God." As events worked out, in prison he has been assigned to work in the chaplain's office!

How can we receive eternal life? We must come to Jesus with the heart of a child, and we must realize

salvation is a gift from God. And third, it is,

III. Obtainable by faith in Jesus, the risen Son of God

Luke 18:31-34

And he took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For he will be delivered up to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day he will rise again." And they understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said.

Peter was reminding the Lord of the great sacrifice he and all the other disciples had made to follow him. Jesus immediately seized on that statement and reminded his men of the sacrifice he was about to endure on their behalf in order to make eternal life possible for all who placed their faith in him as their personal Lord and Savior. He listed for them seven terrible things that had to happen in order to fulfill all the OT prophecy that he was truly the Messiah who was announced by John the Baptist when he said, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1: 29, 1:36).

1) The Son of Man would be delivered up to the Gentiles. (Matthew and Mark tell us that he would be delivered over to the Jewish chief priests and the scribes. They would condemn him to death and then turn him over to the Roman Gentiles.) The Romans would 2) mock him; 3) mistreat him; 4) spit on him; 5) scourge him; 6) the Gentile governor Pilate would sentence him to death by means of the Roman cross; and then, on the third day after his death and burial in a tomb 7) he would rise again as the conqueror over death. As Paul would write to the Corinthians years later, "... Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (Isa. 53; Ps.22, Ps.16). The apostle wrote a little later to these same believers, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (1 Cor. 15:3-4; 2 Cor. 8:9).

What of the disciples? "And they understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said." This is the seventh time our Lord predicted his forthcoming suffering (5:35; 9:22, 43-45, 12:50; 13:32f; 17:25), but the minds and hearts of the disciples were still fixed on the materialistic promise of the kingdom. Thus they could not comprehend this reality at this time. It would finally become clear when the risen Lord would explain it all to two of his disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24.)

Every Wednesday morning, some 70 businessmen gather at "Agora," our marketplace ministry in downtown Palo Alto, to eat breakfast together and share the gospel of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways. Last week, we invited Michael Green and his team to share the gospel to this group of men from every walk of life, men who have a variety of physical, emotional and spiritual needs. As I looked around the room I felt that every man at one time or another had probably heard the gospel presented clearly. I personally knew many who had invited Jesus into their lives as their Lord and Savior. And yet, God had drawn some men that morning so that for the first time "their hearts were burning within them as they heard the Lord explain the scriptures to them" through Michael. At the end of the meeting, Michael gave the men an opportunity to invite Jesus into their hearts as their Lord and Savior, and several men did just that.

How can we receive eternal life?

1) We must come to Jesus with the heart of a child, believing he is the the Good Teacher, God incarnate, the Messiah and Savior, the Lamb of God who came to earth, willing to take away our personal sins and the sin of the world.

2) We must realize that Jesus is the only one who can offer us eternal life; and that life is a gift from God; there is nothing we can do to work for it.

3) And this eternal life is obtainable by placing our faith in the risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Once we place our faith in him, that eternal gift is ours forever.

Shortly after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the apostle Peter was arrested for healing a crippled man in the temple area. Peter and John were brought before the Supreme Court of Israel. There they were asked, "By what power or in what name, have you done this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them. "...let it be known to you and all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead-by this name this man stands here before you in good health...and there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4.)

Last Thursday night, a couple was having dinner in a local restaurant. They were young, bright, beautiful, and full of passion. The hope of a wonderful future lay ahead of them because of the university they were attending. They lacked one thing, however, that would have made their lives completely full. His name is Jesus Christ. He is ready and willing to offer them eternal life so that they might become complete in this life and the life to come. "For there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Catalog No. 4267
Luke 18:15-34
52nd Message
Ron R. Ritchie
January 26, 1992

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