

How To Receive The Gift Of Eternal Life

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Date: 09 November 1986

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[0 : 00] Our God, we must confess that this is a terribly familiar story, and even as we hear it, our hearts are hardened that we don't hear it.

The very familiarity of it doesn't allow us to know that you, our living Lord, are using these written words to speak to us on this day in this year.

And at this moment, so our God, remind us again by the inward working and grace of your Holy Spirit, that today, as we hear your voice, we will not harden our hearts.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Remembrance Day is on Tuesday, and we'll have a service then, as you will hear. There are a number of families who have brought their children to be baptized today.

[1 : 15] and this week we have an election for the city, for the aldermen and parks and mayor and things like that.

So there's a lot of events taking place in our life and yet it is the wisdom of God, I suppose, that we turn back in the midst of all this for this hour on this first day of the week to hear what God in Christ through his word is saying to us.

And we look at this story, a ruler, one whom we've come to know as a rich and young ruler, one who has obtained power and wealth and prestige and position very early in life so that he can give his energies to further pursuits the pursuit that he has in mind now is in a question which he puts to Jesus Christ and that question is, good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

That's the question. The answer, as those of you who are familiar with the story will know, is go and sell what you have and give to the poor and come and follow me.

And at that point, over and over and over again, I have seen people turn away from the Christian faith and the possibility of seriously considering being a disciple of Jesus Christ at just that point.

[3 : 05] It is so impractical, so out of touch with reality, to be told, go and sell what you have and give it to the poor.

That's not the way the world works. And so what we do is we take our religion and we put it on a back burner, very low indeed, and leave it there until such time as when life is fading fast and we're losing our grip on it, we might reconsider the possibility of faith, but for the moment, it is totally impractical.

You can't do it. And people turn away. Other people have turned with, I think, unwarranted zeal and have gone out at that moment and done precisely what was said, sold all they had and gone and live in the rest of their life in poverty and contemplation.

Not always wisely, I don't think. So it's a very difficult passage to hear. And my prayer is that we might hear it this morning.

And not only that we might hear it, but that it might change your life. You don't need to be consolidated in the life you're now living.

[4 : 29] You know how to live it. You probably don't need any more than you've already got. But there is something here which is of priceless value.

And when the rich young ruler says, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? That's what he's asking for. He's asking a very profound question indeed.

Jesus stops him right away and says, why do you call me good? Does he know who he's talking to? Does he suspect that the very one whom he is addressing is the one in whom the answer to this question is to be found of all the men in all the catalogs of history?

This is the man. Does this rich young ruler suspect that he is standing face to face with him of whom it is said in John 5, 26, for as the father has life in himself, so he has granted the son also to have life in himself.

[5 : 45] He is talking person to person to the source of life and asking the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus, in effect, says, do you know who you're asking that question to? I think perhaps more for you this morning and me than for that young ruler.

Do we know who it is that we are addressing? Well, the first thing about it is he puts it in the typical language of human religion that I think has led us again down so many false trails.

what must I do? As though we could do something to inherit eternal life. What did you do in order to possess the life which you now have?

What did you do? You may have come in some rebellion into this life, but you didn't do anything about it.

[6 : 55] it was something that was given to you. What do you do to have eternal life? You can't do anything. It's got to be given to you.

So, Jesus answers him on that question. If you look at the words eternal life, you will find that life is, as it's spoken of there, that one word, that four-letter word, life, is that which finds its natural ending in death, that life is corruptible, that life is accident-prone, that life stirs and moves us, that life can come to full bloom in health and happiness, that bloom can fade, that life has a capacity to do things, that life is the supreme good, in a very strange and wonderful way.

it's the thing that we hold on to. The most tragic circumstances of our existence are when we despair of life.

That's an invaluable gift. And what we do in our generation and in our time is to take that gift, circumscribe by time, corruptible, ending in death, and we tie and exploit it to its fullest degree.

And the way we exploit it is we run as far as we can, a marathon if possible, we climb mountains, we cross countries in wheelchairs, we do all sorts of things to maximize that thing which we have which is life.

[8 : 54] We swim, we run, we do things for our cardiovascular system, we do everything possible. if your liver breaks down, they replace it, if your valves blow, they put new ones, if your heart goes, they put new ones, if your lung breaks down, they put new ones, and they're working on your brain, which boggles the imagination as to what might happen.

but what we are doing is in all these things we are maximizing the potential of this life which is still subject to death, corruptible, in a certain time frame, and inevitably will blow apart.

that famous doctor from New York said that what's going to happen once we've got all our exercises in place and our surgical procedures perfected, and I don't know the poem, but he referred to the one-haw shade that was so beautifully built that every part of it was perfectly balanced against every part, and it went on and on and on, and one day the one-haw shade could go no further and it just collapsed in a heap.

and that's what we're doing with our life. We're exploiting life. Perhaps small I-i-f-e. We're exploiting it to its maximum. We are seeking to be good stewards of this life.

And so we're exploiting every aspect of it by running, by thinking, by examining every possibility and exploring every possibility, going to the top of Mount Everest, whatever we can do, we're exploiting it, pushing back the limits so that all that life can give to us, we want.

[10 : 47] We recognize we can't overcome death. We recognize that we are in a very tight time frame that isn't very expandable.

and we recognize that the ultimate breakdown is going to come and that all we've invested in exploiting it will all ultimately count for nothing.

But that's the question our generation is asking. Is there a food I can eat? Is there a diet I can go on? Is there a drink I can swallow?

Is there a mountain I can climb? Is there a book I can read? Is there a secret wisdom I can be initiated into in order to exploit the full possibilities of life?

That's our question right now. But this rich young ruler was far wiser than you and I because he asked a different question.

[11 : 50] He didn't say good master what may I do to have life? He said what may I do to have eternal life? And the Bible talks about eternal life.

It talks about a tree which has fruit and if you eat that fruit you will have life eternal. It talks about a well or a spring where if you drink that water you will have life eternal.

It talks about a book in which your name is to be written. You see the Bible doesn't treat death as a natural phenomenon.

It doesn't surrender to physical death. We all do. All that we want to do with our life we want to do before it comes. We hope it's slow and coming for the most part.

But the Bible doesn't say that. The life that this man wants is something which is larger than death. Which is not subject to the limitation of natural death. He wants something infinitely more than that when he asks the question.

[13:00] see it's not self evident or necessary from a biblical point of view that man should be subject to death. He recognizes that man is not what he thinks, man is not what he eats, man is not what he drinks, man is not what he reads.

Man has life because it is a gift from God. And when he goes back and asks this question, he's asking the question, where do I find the source of life?

I don't want to just expand the limits of life, I want to get in touch with the source. And that's eternal life. Now basically, you see, what's happening in a baptism service is that parents are bringing their children and saying, we want these children to whom we, by the process of procreation, have given life, which is subject to time and subject to death and subject to corruptibility and Brexit and prone and all those things.

Our children are children of those circumstances. We want them to have eternal life. And so in the hearts of parents and grandparents, friends and family, must be the same question.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? How can we claim such an inheritance for our children? It's exactly the same question.

[14:45] Well, man doesn't live by bread alone. Man, the source of man's life is God. And so what man has to do is get in touch with that source of life.

To be cut off from God is to be cut off from the source of life. To live your life apart from God is to live life out of touch with its source.

All you can do, and Jesus answers the young man and says, well, keep the law. Don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't lie, do those things.

The young man says, I've done that. All my life I've done that. Do I have eternal life? Well, remember we ran into the same obstacle last week, when the rich man tried to send Lazarus to his brothers, and they said, if they won't hear that, then they won't hear if someone rose from the dead. And so Jesus turns to the young man and very poignantly says to him, there's a lovely part you know in this story where it says that Jesus loved his man.

[16:11] He turned to him and said, you lack one thing, he said to him, one thing, the one thing he said to him was, follow me, because I am the source of eternal life.

that's what he said. That's not what we hear. What we hear is, let me quote to you the precise words.

He says, sell all that you have, distribute to the poor, you will have treasure in heaven. He said, quote, that's not what it says.

I'm telling you this, and I'm not twisting it. I'm telling you this because Jesus understands that eternal life for which he asked was something of infinitely more value than all that he had, everything that he had.

Jesus knew that he was after something more. What must I do to inherit eternal life? That's what he was asking for. He was asking for the sky and the stars and the moon and the sun and the rest of the universe thrown in as well.

[17:38] That's what he was asking for. Jesus said, well, get rid of that junk that's cluttering up your life now and follow me, if that's what you want.

And not only did Jesus say that to him, but he said, if you'll do that, right now you'll be better off than you are, and beyond death, you'll be infinitely better off.

That's where it is. That's what I'll give you. So the thing that Jesus is saying is, come and follow me. You have been obedient from your youth to these commandments.

They lead you into obedience to me. Follow me and you will inherit eternal life. Well, when he said that, you see, what he did for the young man was bring the young man up against the question that all of us have to come up against and say, is that what we really want?

If you don't want it, don't waste your time. It. And I think he convinced the young man that's not really what he wanted.

[18 : 55] What he wanted was what he already had. And to hold on to it was what he chose to do. He couldn't find the source of love.

He did not have the ability to let go. He just didn't have it. He's like you and me in that, isn't he? We don't have it. We can't let go of what we've got.

For a promise like that. It doesn't make sense. It's not logical. It's not rational. There's nothing about it that appeals to us. We will not let go. So Jesus discusses it with his disciples and he says, I'm not surprised.

He said, it would be like a camel going through the eye of a needle. Utterly ridiculous and utterly impossible. He wouldn't let go. Nobody would.

What they have for the speculative possibility of some spiritual reality which is beyond the scope of even death. No, let's hold on to what we've got.

[20 : 02] Little as it is, let's hold on to it tight. what we are. And the disciples are just about in despair and they say to Jesus, well, who's going to be saved?

to. Well, it's not going to work. Jesus says, what is impossible with men is possible with God. It's up against that, you see. It's when we come up against the impossibilities of our life and recognize the impossibility of our life.

That what we most want and what we most long for and what we most desire and what we were made for in the beginning and what God's purpose was in us from the beginning, we cannot attain. There is nothing we can do. With men, it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

[21 : 06] so, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I sign you with the sign of the cross in token that hereafter you will not be ashamed to confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

We're claiming by reason of God's grace alone subject only to God's mercy. We're claiming what we could never attain by ourselves, what must be for us the gift of God.

In the keeping of the law, all that we can do is to see that we have hearts which are receptive to that. That's all. all we can do is that our hands should be open to receive that gift.

When the rich young ruler was asking for the gift, Jesus said, well, empty your hands and I'll give it to you. But he wouldn't let go of what he had.

[22 : 25] So he couldn't receive what Christ alone could give. so you and I, as we review our own baptism, our own deep quest for eternal life, have to face that question.

Does what we have mean more to us than that inheritance which God has promised us in Jesus Christ? Parents and God parents can stand on behalf of these children and say, no, that's what we want for them and for ourselves.

And all of you have the opportunity to answer in the same way. Amen.