

Mark 10:17-31
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Do you think she's in heaven?

What happens when we die?

Is my dog in heaven?

Do you think I will see him again?

Do you believe in heaven?

What's heaven like?

These are some of the questions that I get. And I've always been a little bit surprised that, in scripture, Jesus doesn't get these same questions. If the disciples had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was sent from God, that he was the Son of God... don't you think they'd have a lot of questions about what happens when you die? But as far as we know from the gospel writers, we don't hear a lot of those questions being asked.

Except here. When a wealthy young man comes up and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's an unusual question for a first century Jew in Judea. And what does he mean? Does he mean how do I get to heaven? What must I do to be saved? What happens after I die? This kind of angst about salvation wasn't common, although there was and is a belief in the afterlife, traditional Judaism places such an emphasis on the here and now, that most Jews, especially in the time of Jesus, didn't focus heavily on the afterlife. Their assurance that they were right with God was indicated by their life circumstance.

Generally, it was, and is still believed, that one received blessings of wealth in their *present* life for being right with God. The common teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures is that if we behave well, if we follow God's law, God will bless us. Therefore, the belief during Jesus'

time was that if a person was powerful, or had many children, or had a lot of money, then they were obviously a good person because God was blessing them. And that belief has not gone away...

This may sound familiar to you. Christian ministries have generated hundreds of millions of dollars on the premise that God will grant us prosperity.

And many Christians flock to this “Prosperity Gospel” belief because they want to believe that if they just say the right thing, or do the right thing, or tithe the right amount to those churches promising wealth, that they will prosper financially. And it makes me wonder why?

Why must ministries deceive their followers with these false promises just to maximize the amount in their offering plates. Why do material possessions mean so much? What does excessive wealth really do for us?

And...here’s the important question this morning...how do we reconcile this desire for prosperity with the scripture? It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to get into heaven. Money corrupts. When is enough enough? There is **nothing** in the drive to accumulate excessive personal wealth that will help you get your soul right with God. And Jesus knows this.

I’ve shared with you that our Thursday morning bible study has been studying the book of Job. And the story of Job is told as a response to the myth that prosperity is a sign you are right with God. This “measuring stick” wasn’t adding up. Bad things happen to good people... and good things happen to people with malice in their heart.

This rich young ruler who approached Jesus believed his power and wealth were signs of righteousness with God. Yet, this Jesus comes along, preaching about the kingdom of God, he is turning everything on its head and suddenly the young ruler isn’t so clear anymore. He must

have been confused...even panicked. How can he know he is still right with God? So he asks, "Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor; then come and follow me." Crestfallen, the man walks away in disbelief. Jesus then turns to his disciples and says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

We never hear anything more about that man. Do you think he did it? Sold all of his possessions, and just gave the money away? How hard it would have been? Inherit... Inherit the kingdom... Not *earn* it... or *buy* it... but inherit. That's an interesting word, isn't it? The young man wants to *inherit* eternal life. As a rich man, this is not something he can buy; it is something that must be given, like something passed on from parent to child. As one pastor I read this week says, "In this case, eternal life is passed on from God to God's children. In order to qualify for the inheritance, the man must become a part of the family of God."

Yet we often think it is transactional, but salvation is not transactional. There is not something we do that will make us fit for heaven. There is not some checklist that God is holding to see if we do enough of them to earn heaven. There is not a certain amount that we put in the offering plate...That's not the way it works.

When someone asks me if their loved one who has recently passed away is in heaven and will they ever see them again, I don't go through an accounting of their good deeds or their characteristics or their baptismal or church membership status in order to answer that question. It's about belonging. Like in a family, one inherits when one belongs. And how do we belong? Well...we already belong. The inheritance is there but in order to partake in it we have to make our hearts right with God. If we don't, we miss it, we fail to see it, we live our lives on our terms never giving our hearts over to God and seeing that the kingdom is already at hand.

I believe that our destiny is not dependent on checking all the boxes, but upon the state of our hearts. And when our hearts are turned to God, we see that eternal life is now. And because of that, Jesus turns the discussion with this young man around. It stops being about getting into heaven some point down the road and instead becomes about the state of your soul today...here...right now...eternal life is happening now and what are you doing to save your soul? Living a righteous life now is salvation.

Another commentator I read said, "Making a soul is a different project altogether, a lifelong task of cultivating wisdom, humility, righteous anger, loving-kindness, mercy, and hospitality, among other virtues. This is the path-- down which-- Jesus attempts to send the seeker."

You might remember the story about the blacksmith who worked hard at his trade. The day came for him to die. The angel was sent to him, and much to the angel's surprise he refused to go. He pleaded with the angel to make his case before God, that he was the only blacksmith in the area and it was time for all his neighbors to begin their planting and sowing. He was needed. So the angel pleaded his case before God. He said that the man didn't want to appear ungrateful, and that he was glad to have a place in the kingdom, but could he put off going for a while? And he was left.

About a year or two later the angel came back again with the same message: the Lord was ready to share the fullness of the kingdom with him. Again the man had reservations and said: "A neighbor of mine is seriously ill and it's time for the harvest. A number of us are trying to save his crops so that his family won't become destitute. Please come back later." And off the angel went again. Well, it got to be a pattern. Every time the angel came, the blacksmith had one excuse or another. The blacksmith would just shake his head and tell the angel where he was

needed and decline. Finally the blacksmith grew very old, weary and tired. He decided it was time, so he prayed: “God, if you like to send your angel again, I'd be glad to come home now.” Immediately the angel appeared, as if from around the corner of the bed. The blacksmith said: “If you still want to take me home, I'm ready to live forever in the kingdom of heaven.” And the angel laughed and looked at the blacksmith in delight and surprise and said: “Where do you think you've been all these years?” He was home.

So you see the wise young ruler in our scripture lesson today didn't understand that his inheritance would be granted when—like the blacksmith—he stopped living for himself, stopped accumulating wealth for himself, and started living for others. Only then does he inherit eternal life. So...what shall *we* do to inherit eternal life? It is already ours, the kingdom of God is here, now we are already living it, when our heart is right with God, when we love and serve each other.