

What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, (11 October) 2009.

Text: Mark 10:17

“As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before [Jesus],
and asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I once preached a great sermon on this story about the young man who had many possessions, who asked Jesus this simple question, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” If I did such a good job explaining and motivating you once before with that sermon, why is it that each time I read it, I am both perplexed and troubled by its implications? Today’s is an odd sermon. I can’t figure out how to end my teaching in it, to wrap it up neatly for you with something to take home. I will leave something to think about as Jesus keeps doing through the telling of this story. The story must have been dear to the early church; Matthew, Mark and Luke each tell it in their gospels. But the young man is never named, leading me to suspect that when ‘he went away sorrowful,’ he did not come back. He seemed so interested in becoming a disciple. He knelt before Jesus and asked him that question. Everything indicates he was serious. The moral shape of his life reveals this was the important quest of his life.¹

There have been a few who took Jesus literally. In the early thirteenth century a young Francis Bernadone emptied his wealthy father’s cloth shop of expensive merchandise and gave away all to follow the master. We know him as St. Francis of Assisi.² He had received a vision of Christ telling him to ‘*repair my house which is falling into ruin.*’ At first he tried actually to rebuild a church building fallen into ruins at Damiano. But in time he realized his call meant he was to reform and revitalize the faith of Christians, to make true disciples of Jesus, and thereby the church would be repaired. Francis took the story of the rich young ruler literally. This drove not only his father but also bishops and popes crazy. Not much different today. Countless generations of preachers have given their congregations a pass, saying, “Jesus did not really mean you have to give away all you have. He was only giving this young fellow that message because his possessions were *too important* to him.” Well, I will not take that tack with you. Is there anyone among us whose possessions are not *too important* to him or her?

The young man in the Gospel story asked his question in the right way. He did not ask Jesus, what must I do to *earn* my way into heaven? He knew it was not a matter of merit or working to deserve it. Rather he said, “What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?” Probably he had inherited his possessions and knew that much of his life had also been a gift, built on the thrift and industry of parents and grandparents. He knew just as his wealth was not something he had worked for, neither was grace something he could achieve. It had to be received as a gift.

¹ Mark 10:20

² St. Francis’ saint day was last Sunday, October 4th.

Yet, Jesus told him to *do* something. He prescribed works for the young man to do to gain eternal life: Follow the commandments, give away all you have to the poor, follow me. Is that not a path to earn salvation? No one but preachers may be concerned with this distinction between faith and works I am about to make. But when you place trust in Jesus, your life must change. It does not happen the other way around. You don't change your life and then Jesus accepts you. Jesus loves you already. When you believe that gospel you want to follow him. This means you follow him in the church, in the world, in every part of your life. You follow the law of Christ³—the love of God and love of neighbor. No matter how much or how little you possess, you put all you are and all you have at his disposal to use for the good Jesus envisions for our world. The young man understood this. He used the right word, *inherit*.

So why is the story so perplexing? The *implications*. I cannot read this and you cannot hear the story without a comparison to our own lives. We, too, know what it is to walk away sorrowful because we have a great abundance in the world but insufficient trust in the Master. Do we put ourselves in his hands completely? We know the young man's search. It is ours, too. We know something is missing in our lives and we keep coming to Jesus to see if he has a pill to prescribe, a path to take, an answer. Most of us in this room even know he has the answer—we have already heard it many times from this pulpit. But it is not so easy as that, is it?

That is the reason this story is so perplexing and troubling. I wish my sermon could answer all your questions, all my own. But my sermonizing cannot take away the conundrum. I can only follow him myself, or walk away sorrowful. We have practiced such a low-commitment discipleship for so long—both you and I—that this choice seems overly severe. To follow Jesus or walk away sorrowful. Is Christianity really this difficult? To truly love God requires that we attend worship regularly, receive the sacraments, study God's word, pray without ceasing. The love our neighbors requires giving of ourselves, sacrificially. It is not a matter of keeping this part for me and giving a token to God and neighbor, it means putting all we have and all we are at his disposal.

I am not, however, naïve. And neither are you. One doesn't quite jump into this as quickly and totally as Francis Bernadone did in the thirteenth century. Yet there remains the fact that many of us hold onto our possessions as if they will save us, not Jesus. What to do? Ah, that's Jesus' question to us in this story. Why face-to-face with the Savior did the young man walk away? The story merely says, because he had great possessions. The implication is that he decided Jesus asked too much of him. I cannot take this tension out of the story for you and make you feel better about your things. I wish I could, I would be relieved of the tension myself. "One thing do you lack: go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."⁴ I like the way the NRSV translates the next line of the story. "When he heard this, he was *shocked*."⁵

I have rearranged my life so many times. I find I have to keep doing it for my possessions keep grabbing hold of me. After I think I've off loaded enough and demonstrated freedom from their clutches, they grasp me again. Sometimes I think they are choking me. Why

³ Galatians 6:2.

⁴ Mark 1:21.

⁵ Mark 1:22.

do I let them have that power over me? We live in a time that doesn't think like this story and so what I am saying may sound like idiocy to many of you.

Jesus would say there are other signs of craziness we ignore in the world. How come we don't think the little voices we hear in our heads is a sign of lunacy? You know that voice. Every time you decide to make an overly generous gift to the church or some other good cause, a little voice whispers: "*Be careful. You can't afford it.*" What if the voice is demonic and not yours at all? What if it is trying to control your life? What would it be worth if Jesus could free you from that little voice's control? I wonder if this is another way of asking the young man's question. Maybe this is what he meant by inheriting eternal life? Being free to live for God?

Now you are all waiting for me to make the stewardship pitch, so here it is. Put more than you think you possibly can at Jesus' disposal by giving it away. His cause, the church, needs your support for several reasons. You know the good works the church accomplishes. But there is also a faith reason to support the church. The congregation needs a preacher who will challenge us with sermons like this and question the prevailing ways the world prescribes for us. It is the job of your ministers to make the case for the gospel, to motivate you to give it a try, to make disciples. It is the purpose of this congregation to support one another in the difficulty of living the law of Christ. The church teaches our children the faith, but it exists to teach us the faith, as well. Many, *many* people in our culture have the question this young man asked Jesus so long ago. Who but the church will help them discover the truth?

If we can escape the clutches of our things and give more than the little voice in our heads permits us, we will find a growing measure of spiritual freedom. My sermon cannot remove the tension and trouble that the story of the rich young ruler brings to my life or your life. But letting go of things is the spiritual wisdom Jesus teaches here. Unfortunately I have no exact formula or calculated answers to help you find your path to eternal life. For some it is a big figure, for others it is smaller. Some of us may walk away from the challenge. But others will do what he teaches and discover the gospel is indeed 'the way, the truth, and the life.'⁶

End

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⁶ John 14:6.