

FOLLOW JESUS: THE WAY TO ETERNAL LIFE

Mark 10:17-31

Key Verse: 10:21

“Jesus looked at him and loved him, ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”

In today’s passage Jesus teaches how to have eternal life. Everyone wants to have eternal life. The Spanish explorer Ponce De Leon sailed to Florida in 1513 looking for the fountain of youth. It was rumored that anyone who drank from or bathed in this fountain would remain young forever. But he did not find it and died. Ironically, these days, Florida is a popular residence for retired people. Like Ponce De Leon, we all long for eternal life; it is a God-given desire (Ec 3:11b). If we have eternal life, we have everything, even if we are penniless. But if we don’t have eternal life we have nothing, even if we have a big bank account. Having eternal life means everything to us. The problem is how to obtain it. Today’s passage contrasts a rich young man and Jesus’ disciples. The rich man knew that eternal life is valuable. But practically, wealth in this world seemed more valuable. He failed to give this up, and could not follow Jesus and have eternal life. On the other hand, Jesus’ disciples left everything to follow him. This is a core requirement of discipleship. Jesus assured them that they had eternal life. Let’s learn from Jesus how we can have eternal life.

First, Jesus challenges a rich young man to follow him (17-22). As Jesus started on his way to Jerusalem, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. Who was this man? Verse 22 tells us that he had great wealth. Matthew adds that he was young and Luke that he was a ruler (Mt 20:22; Lk 18:18). He seemed to have it all: wealth, youth and power. Furthermore, he was a morally upright person, as verse 20 indicates. He probably began spiritual education and training at age six. He memorized the Ten Commandments and many important Bible verses. When he became a teenager he was vulnerable to temptation. But he overcame it all. Now, he was a very promising young man. Many young ladies must have looked at him and sighed, thinking, “If only....” He should have been happy, but he was not. He seemed very desperate. He asked Jesus, **“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** (17). Here we learn that he was not satisfied with what he had. He always had a nagging feeling that he was missing the most important thing. He had no true peace or rest in his heart. He felt empty. In fact, he was crying in his soul. He ran to Jesus, fell on his knees and asked how to inherit

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eternal life. Jesus heard his cry and taught him the way to eternal life. We can find two main points of Jesus' teaching.

In the first place, Jesus corrected his concept of good and helped him to be conscious of sin. When Jesus heard the words, "Good teacher," and "what must I do" he immediately knew what the man's problem was. Jesus said, "**Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone**" (18). This man's concept of good could be measured in terms of human morality. If someone lived up to a certain standard they were good. Those who failed to do so were bad. This man respected Jesus on the basis of his moral standing as a good teacher. He also respected himself as one who had kept the moral standard. But Jesus pointed out that true goodness can be found only in God. The standard of goodness is not man, but God. When measured by God's standard, everyone falls short; everyone is a sinner (Ro 3:23). The Bible says, "**There is no one righteous, not even one**" (Ro 3:10). For example, before meeting Jesus, Peter thought he was a pretty good guy: faithful, hardworking, morally upright. But when he saw God in Jesus, he became aware of his sin, fell at Jesus' knees, and cried out, "**Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!**" (Lk 5:8). Simply speaking, God alone is good; all human beings are sinners.

After correcting his concept of good, Jesus said, "**You know the commandments: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother**" (19). The man could have said, "Well, Jesus, I tried, but it is very hard." But to our surprise, he declared, "**Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy**" (20). Wow! He had struggled a lot to keep all these commandments since he was a boy. Maybe he had some scars on his forehead, like some orthodox Jews: they close their eyes to avoid looking at approaching women, and bump their heads on low-lying branches.

Most likely he had kept the commandments externally. But keeping the spirit of the commandments is a different matter. In Mark 12:30-31, Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments in two statements: "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,**" and, "**Love your neighbor as yourself**" (Dt 6:5; Lev 19:18). There are two kinds of sins: sins of commission—doing what is forbidden by the law—and sins of omission—not doing positively what the law requires. Heartfelt obedience to God's word is not just a matter of attending Sunday worship service regularly. It is not just living morally upright, carefully avoiding major

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mistakes. Heartfelt obedience to God is to love God positively with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is not easy for anyone to love his neighbor as himself. In order to do that, we need to deny ourselves and be willing to sacrifice. In the young man's case, there must have been many sins of omission. As a rich man, he could have put his hope in God and been generous to the needy like Job was. Furthermore, it is impossible for anyone to keep the law internally. Jesus said that even looking at someone with lustful desire is tantamount to adultery, and being angry with someone is akin to murder (Mt 5:22,28). Paul kept all the law externally, but he was totally helpless to stop coveting in his heart. So he cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Ro 7:24) Jesus quoted the Ten Commandments to help the man see himself through God's standard so he might be conscious of sin. In order to receive eternal life, anyone must first be conscious of sin.

In the second place, Jesus challenged him to put first priority in following Jesus. Usually when we hear a self-righteous person boasting about how much they have done for the Lord, we feel disgusted. Or we look at them with contempt because they are so spiritually ignorant. But how did Jesus see this man? **"Jesus looked at him and loved him"** (21a). Jesus recognized the man's earnestness and said, **"One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"** (21b). Jesus' response was not intended to shame the man, exposing his shallow understanding of the commandments; it was an expression of genuine love. Jesus saw this young man's problem as valuing his wealth more than God. Jesus wanted to help him change his value system and put his hope in God. We should realize that Jesus' command is not a blanket statement that applies to everyone. Jesus' words can be properly applied to those who have the same spiritual problem as the rich man. But the spiritual truth of Jesus' words applies to all of us. Our hearts must be focused on God. Every possession comes from God; we are just stewards of what God has given. Apostle Paul described how to use wealth properly. He said, **"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life"** (1 Ti 6:17-19). Jesus wanted to set the man free from slavery to wealth, so that he might enjoy God and have eternal life.

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Jesus promised that when he shared his wealth with those in need, he would have treasure in heaven. Our treasure is what we value most. There are two kinds of treasures: earthly treasures—which are vulnerable to ruin and theft, and heavenly treasures—which are everlasting. So Jesus encourages us, **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...”** (Mt 6:19-20). We should consider carefully how we invest. If we spend all our time and energy piling up earthly treasures we will end up like the rich fool in Luke’s gospel (Lk 12:20), and there is no second chance.

What is the treasure in heaven? It is Jesus himself. So Jesus said, **“Follow me.”** In what sense is Jesus a treasure? Colossians 2:3 says, that in Jesus **“are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”** In Jesus there is forgiveness of sins and transforming power. In Jesus there is resurrection and eternal life. In Jesus there is true freedom and joy. In Jesus there is living hope and eternal glory. In Jesus there is everything. If we have Jesus, even if we lose everything in the world, we will gain everything. But if we do not have Jesus, even if we have everything else in the world, we lose everything. When the Apostle Paul met the Risen Jesus, he found his real treasure. He considered everything a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus (Php 3:8). Moses willingly gave up all the treasures of Egypt in order to gain Christ (Heb 11:25-26). When Mother Barry came to know Jesus, she was willing to give her youth and marriage and whole life to serve him. When someone asked her if it was worth it, she said “I never feel that I lost anything. I gained everything in Jesus.” Dawn Smith Jordan was planning to enter a beauty pageant in 1986. Then, to her utter shock, her younger sister was kidnapped and murdered just two days before high school graduation. Dawn was overcome with grief. The thought of a beauty crown meant nothing to her. But as she sought God in prayer, she heard Philippians 4:13, **“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”** She found strength in Jesus, competed and became Miss South Carolina. She dedicated her crown to Jesus and gave glory to God by testifying in a Billy Graham crusade. Later, she forgave the murderer. She has continued to share her testimony for over two decades. Jesus is everything to her. In Matthew 13:44 Jesus told the parable of the treasure hidden in the field. When a man found this treasure, he went and sold all he had joyfully and bought that field. Innumerable people have found Jesus and been willing to sell everything to follow him. This is the way of eternal life.

What was the rich young man’s response? Verse 22 says, **“At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”** His problem was that he wanted to gain eternal life and keep his earthly treasure at the same

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time. He had lived an exemplary moral life and would have received a 99% on his heavenly entrance exam. But one thing, one percent, he lacked. Because of this one thing he lacked, he lost everything. His root problem was greed. Many of us know how to catch a monkey. We need to put a banana in a jar with an opening just big enough to allow the monkey's hand to reach in. When the monkey grabs the banana, he cannot get it out of the jar. If he just lets go of the banana, he can run free. But the monkey cannot let it go and is captured by the hunter. We should not be like this monkey. We should not hold anything so tightly that it hinders us from following Jesus. Corrie Ten-Boom said, "I have learned to hold precious things loosely." We should be like Job who said, **"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised"** (Job 1:21).

Second, Jesus blesses his disciples who followed him (23-31). As the man was walking away, Jesus looked around at his disciples and said, **"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"** (23) The dominant Jewish view was that riches were an indication of divine favor, a reward for piety (Ps 128:1-2). Jesus' teaching was revolutionary at that time. So the disciples were amazed. But Jesus said again, **"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God"** (24-25). By means of a humorous hyperbole Jesus illustrated that it was humanly impossible for the rich to be saved. Generally, people think that if they have more money they will serve God more effectively. So they pray to be rich, like Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof." But once the money comes into their hands, their mindset changes. They begin to put their hope in money rather than God. So rich people really need faith, like Abraham, Job and David. They should know that all things come from God, and they are just stewards. They need to learn how to spend money wisely. They need to rule over money, instead of being ruled by money. But this is not easy. This is why most lottery winner's lives are ruined after winning a lot of money. Jesus did not teach that wealth is evil. Jesus did not teach that poverty is better than riches. He did not teach that only the poor can be saved. He did teach that discipleship is costly and that wealth is often a hindrance to repentance and accepting the gospel.

Maybe the disciples had hoped to be rich. But when they heard Jesus' words, they were even more amazed, and said to each other, **"Who then can be saved?"** (26) Maybe they began to think that if they continued to follow Jesus, they would be poor for the rest of their lives. They wondered if even after living in poverty they could be saved. Jesus saw their gloomy faces and said, **"With man this is**

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impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (27). Salvation does not come through man’s achievements or efforts. Salvation depends on God’s sovereign will and it is totally by God’s grace; it is the gift of God (Ro 6:23b; Eph 2:8). Hearing Jesus’ words, Peter was very encouraged and blurted out, **“We have left everything to follow you!”** (28) Peter realized that he was not like the rich young man. By God’s grace, he had left everything and followed Jesus. As Matthew indicates, Peter added, **“What then will there be for us?”** (Mt 19:27b). This implies, “We want compensation!” To be sure, Jesus’ disciples were very courageous in leaving everything behind to follow Jesus, and they were truth seekers.

Jesus promised them: **“Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life”** (29-30). Here Jesus summarizes the cost of discipleship and its blessings. Jesus wants his disciples to give first priority to his calling for them, regardless of what they have to leave behind. Jesus said in Matthew 10:37: **“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”** Following Jesus is costly. However, as we follow Jesus, we will surely be blessed a hundred times more in this present age. Primarily this means we become members of Jesus’ family. Jesus is our Lord and we have many dear family members purchased by his blood. The fellowship we share in Jesus is richer, deeper and fuller than biological family relationships. Wherever they go, God’s children open their homes to each other. At the same time, Jesus said that the blessing would be mixed with persecutions. If there were no persecution we would be happy. But persecution also has a good purpose. God uses it to refine our character and purify our faith so that we may have living hope in the kingdom of God (1 Pe 1:7). Jesus promised blessing in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life.

In this passage, the important thing is that everything is done for Jesus and the gospel. When we sacrifice for the sake of Jesus, we will not lose anything. We live the most blessed life in this world and are guaranteed eternal life in the age to come. This is the most secure investment of our lives that we can make. This amazing and sure blessing comes with a warning: **“But many who are first will be last, and the last first”** (31). We should not be self-righteous; nor should we be

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complacent. We should always be alert and live with a clear purpose to follow Jesus. It is because following Jesus is the way of eternal life.