

# What Shall I Do?

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18, Luke 10:25-42 (ESV) May 15, 2005

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Therein lies the question. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer’s question is recorded here not so much as a lesson in ancient history as an encouragement for you and me to take it up as our own. The questions we ask have a great deal to do with the answers we get. This question may be the most important one of our lives. There are other questions: What shall we wear? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Where shall we be this time next year? These are important in their own way. But none is as important as this question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” We would do well to make it our own. Today’s reading gives two answers to this question. One is terrifying. The other is full of grace and mercy. We shall get to those in a moment. For now, let us consider the question itself.

“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Part of the good news of today’s reading, embedded in this very question, is that there is eternal life for us. There is life beyond this life. There is life beyond death. There is life for us beyond the ravages of time, decay, decline, disease, and death. There is another world beyond this one, where wrongs of this world are righted, where the incompletenesses are made whole, and where the mysteries are clarified. It is only in the hope of such a world that the moral ambiguities of this world can be tolerated, that insults can be borne, and that forgiveness can be sought. It is only in the hope of such a world that we can dare to believe that the one who made us for himself shall one day regather us all to himself. So the gospel of Jesus Christ affirms that there is eternal life, that God does hold us dear, and that he has plans and purposes for us that go far beyond this life and this world.

Some would think such other worldly faith diminishes this life. They reason that if the next life is held to be so wonderful, this one must be reduced to insignificance and therefore be unimportant. But that is wrong. Setting this brief life within the context of eternal life shows just how important this life is. What we do here matters forever. The relationships we form here are part of eternity. The growth in maturity and character we accomplish here will be with us forever. So the hope of eternal life does not diminish this temporal life. In fact, it provides the only possible context for its true importance. To see this from the other way around, if there were no hope for eternal life, it really would not matter what we do here. We could hate, steal, lie, and cheat with impunity. We could do whatever we pleased precisely

because there would not be any long term consequences. So let us be clear that the hope for eternal life does not at all diminish this temporal life; only the hope for eternal life elevates this temporal life to its true importance.

“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The urgency of today’s reading, also embedded in this very question, is the realization that there is the opposite to eternal life. That is to say, there is also eternal death. There is beyond this life and death an everlasting death, an eternal separation from God, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. So the inheritance of eternal life is not automatic. The very question of what to do to inherit eternal life would make no sense apart from this realization that it is entirely possible to go the other direction. The gospel of Jesus Christ acknowledges this terrible, negative possibility that human life here may reach its end continuing in willful alienation from God and that such a horrible end may also be the eternal disposition of the self. Surely we want to do everything we can to avoid that. We would do well to use this life we have been given here to seek that which leads to the life beyond and not to follow that which leads to eternal death. So the lawyer’s concern was pertinent. His question was appropriate. There are other questions: What shall we wear? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Where shall we be this time next year? These are important in their own way. But none is as important or as urgent as this question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” We would do well to make it our own.

So, what are the answers? Jesus said to the man, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And the lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” This is the answer that terrifies me: “Do this, and you will live.” Obey the law of God, and you will live forever. Obey the Ten Commandments, and you will have eternal life. This answer is, of course, entirely correct. Jesus spoke no lie. And we always want to acknowledge that behind the commandments to love God and neighbor stands the always prior good news that God has already loved us, apart from which good news the commandments make no sense. And yet, by itself this answer terrifies me. This answer brings me low, because I know that already I have not obeyed God, and I hear the door closing. I know that I have not obeyed the law, and I realize that I cannot obey the law, so I know that I cannot earn eternal life. Yes, one person obeyed the law perfectly, Jesus Christ, and we shall return to that in a moment, but none of the rest of us can do that. So this entirely correct answer, that obedience leads to life and that perfect obedience leads to eternal life, by itself leaves me cold and scared. It is no comfort at all.

There is a second answer, and it is full of grace and mercy. It comes in the next story, or in what I had always taken to be the next story, but now I think it is part of the same story, because it gives another answer to the same question. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” “One thing is necessary.” What did Mary do? Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” Ah! There is the answer. Mary listened to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the one thing necessary. That is the good portion to be chosen. That will not be taken away, ever, which means it leads to eternal life. Thanks be to God!

Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.” And that is exactly what we are doing today. I am not the one who teaches. It is the Lord who teaches through me. Otherwise, what I say would be worth nothing. If you do not hear the voice of Jesus in my words, you need to find a preacher in whose words you do hear his voice. But if you do hear the voice of Jesus in my words, in any preacher’s words, realize that it is the very word of God. For there is not a preacher in the world who is smart enough on his or her own to have anything to say to you that is worth hearing. The word of God alone is what we need to hear. “One thing is necessary.”

That, by the way, is what Pentecost is all about (and today is Pentecost): God sent his Holy Spirit to work in and through the preachers of the gospel so that their words would be his words; and God sent his Holy Spirit to work in and through the hearts of the hearers so that hearing they might believe, and believing they might be saved. That is what the Holy Spirit does, communicate God’s word to us and work saving faith within us. That is why we celebrate Pentecost. Again, Mary listened to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, that is what we are doing yet today, for the stumbling words I offer are graciously and miraculously changed into the one thing that is necessary, the good portion that will not be taken away, ever. And so we inherit eternal life.

There are other ways of talking about this. You would be familiar with the language if I were to say, “You shall not be saved through our works of the law.” Well, we could be if we could and would obey the law, but, as a matter of fact, neither you nor I shall be saved through works of the law. You would also be familiar with the language if I were to say, “You shall be saved by grace through faith.” Now, that is the gospel, and that is our only hope. The grace of God, enacted particularly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and poured out upon us in the preaching of the gospel, is what saves us.

In a way, this gets us back to the first answer, that obedience leads to life, except that here we realize that it is Christ's perfect obedience which has been credited to our account. That is sheer, undeserved grace. So this completes the first answer. And we receive this grace of God through faith, through hearing the gospel of grace, through believing it, trusting it, and relying upon it. Such faith is not another work on our part. Faith is that special knowledge, an acknowledgment, that in Jesus Christ God has done for us the work we could not do for ourselves. We would continue to be lost in any hope we harbored of saving ourselves. But we are saved precisely in the realization that God alone has saved us.

So this is the second answer to the question. A lawyer asked, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The first answer was, "Obey the law, and you shall live." That is terrifying in and of itself. But the second answer is, "Hear and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, and you shall live forever." That is wonderful. That is full of joy and life. That is something we are doing right now, hearing and believing the gospel, rejoicing in the goodness of God, and receiving the blessing of Jesus Christ, all by the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus eternal life begins.

What now? What about the rest of this life before we enter into the fullness of the next life? Having heard the gospel, how shall we live the Christian life? At this point, it seems, it would be helpful to return to what Jesus and the lawyer had to say to each other. After that absolutely brilliant answer, summing up the entire Old Testament in one sentence—love God and neighbor—the lawyer somehow sensed that he was in trouble, and he began to backpedal and to seek a way out. "Who is my neighbor?" The point was, of course, "Who is not my neighbor?" That is, "From whom may I legally withhold love?" That was not very becoming. But the answer that Jesus gave him sets a wonderful standard for living the Christian life:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to

the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Jesus did not say, this time, “Do this, and you will live.” He said, instead, “You go, and do likewise.” That is to say, doing this does not earn eternal life. However, this is the kind of life that our Lord wills for us to live, so it is of special significance to those who have heard and believed the gospel. It is an expression of gratitude and obedience. It is not up to us to define who is and who is not our neighbor. It is up to us to be a neighbor, to see the needy, to have compassion, to bind up wounds, and to take care of those beaten down by the world. There is nothing specifically religious about such activity. The religious part of life is hearing the gospel in the context of praising and worshiping God. That is what we are doing here and now. But the life of compassion out there is the result of the religious part of life in here. The Christian life is the fruit of the gospel and the consequence of grace. It is only because we learn here of the always prior love of God for us in Jesus Christ that we are made able to love God and to love neighbor.

That is to say again, the grace of God to us elicits from us both our gratitude to God which we express in worship here and work beyond here and also our graciousness toward each other which we model here and live in the Christian life beyond here. It is this graciousness, this life of compassion, which this parable seeks to elicit from us. Are we ready to do this, individually and as a church? We do this through our tithes and alms. We do this through feeding the hungry: Meals on Wheels, Stuart Circle Meals Ministry, Five Cents Per Meal Offering, Conrad Center, Can-a-Month Sunday, William Byrd Community House, One Great Hour of Sharing, and on and on. We have an opportunity now to do this through sponsoring a refugee family. “Which...proved to be a neighbor?” “The one who showed him mercy.” “You go, and do likewise.” That is how to live the Christian life. God, help us!

Of course, prior to living the Christian life, it is necessary to become a Christian, to become a believer, so that brings us back to the beginning. “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Therein lies the question, and it is our question. I still like the second answer best. “One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” What did Mary do? Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.”

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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