

WHAT MUST I DO?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke 18: 18 – 30 (NRSV)

A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor you father and mother.”

He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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.”

Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

The question of the ruler, often called “the rich young ruler,” is a timeless question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a question, however, that has often been misunderstood and therefore distorted. Most commonly the question has been rendered, “What must I do to go to heaven?” Or, “What reward will I earn if I am good?”

We are like the family in the station wagon that was loaded to the hilt when it pulled into the only remaining campsite. No sooner had the vehicle pulled to a stop when six children jumped out of the car and immediately unloaded the station wagon and pitched the family tent. With the last stake driven into the ground, three children set out to gather firewood while the other three set up the camp stove and cooking utensils. In no time flat they had a campfire roaring and coffee was brewing on the Coleman stove.

A nearby camper had watched the whole procedure and he felt compelled to compliment the parents on their fine organization. "I have never seen such cooperative children," he marveled.

"Well, we have a system," replied the father. "We have just traveled non-stop three hundred miles from our home and we have one simple rule. Nobody goes to the bathroom until camp is set up."

Eternal life has come to mean for many people a reward for, or a relief from the burdens of this world. And as such, it has become an individual reward. Everyone asks, "What's in it for me?" Or, "What will I get." Children do not have to be very old before they start asking, "How much will you pay me?" For many people this has become the main object of religious identity and practice. People cannot imagine why you

would follow a religious practice if it did not involve some kind of reward that meant a personal existence beyond this life. Christian practice has devolved into an individualized and personal piety that asks, “Is Jesus is your Lord and personal savior? And if not, how will you ever get to heaven?”

I think we can understand how people can believe such notions. Most especially we can appreciate those who were born into poverty or oppression and for whom salvation can only mean escape from this world in the hope of a better world to come. And in a capitalist society where identity and possession, self and accumulation, ego and consumption are indistinguishable it is not too difficult to see how our religious faith becomes spiritual materialism.

The rich young ruler’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is still a timeless question; even if the church has got it wrong! The question is not “Where will I go when I die?” Throughout the teachings of Jesus he does not offer reward for sacrifice.¹ However, Jesus is constantly inviting people into God’s domain, the kingdom of God. So the question is not properly one of future reward or some other life. The question is one’s place in God’s eternal values in the present moment.

¹ Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1993), 371.

The heart of the question is, “How does one enter those eternal values that give life meaning?” “How does one step into the stream of those everlasting principles that makes one feel a resonance with life?” “What must we do to participate in the ceaseless standards that give life God’s joyful presence?”

This is the heart of the question that the rich ruler asked Jesus two millennia ago. It is the question that children and young people are asking today. Older generations are still arguing about the existence of God. Younger generations are not asking whether God is, but who God is. They are not seeking rational answers to metaphysical questions. What does the gospel of Jesus offer to us and the meaning of our lives?

Like many young people, the rich man knew that something was missing from his life. His wealth and status did not abate the yearning in his heart to be connected with something greater than himself. He wanted to belong to some great cause, a cause that money could not buy. He sought union with something that would claim his soul, something that would propel him out of the ceaseless need to assure his ego. He wanted an abiding sense of worth that was deeper than “I’m OK, you’re OK.” He wanted that frightening loneliness that ached in the pit of his stomach to be healed with authentic community.

Not only had his wealth not satisfied his yearnings, even his religion had failed him. In the context of this story in Luke, the rich ruler was a good Jew. He kept the laws and commandments, and he regularly sacrificed in the Temple. Indeed, he has been a devout Jew since he was a child. Were he a Baptist we might suggest that he was “born again,” tithed ten percent of his gross income to his church; attended Sunday morning and evening services, and prayer meeting on Wednesday. He would be called a “fine Christian gentleman.” Were he a Congregationalist he would have a liberal social conscience, went to church twice a month, pledged three percent of his adjust net income, and served on the church’s finance committee. The point is, the routine of religion failed him. As Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “the saints ought to be at least as decent as ordinary folks.”

But ultimately that was not enough and the rich ruler knew it. He could get no satisfaction. Jesus said to him, “You lack one thing. Go and sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor.”

Now if you were to read this story literally and attempt to act upon it, I would wonder about your mental health. It would be socially irresponsible for you to abandon your family and your pension to poverty. Anyone who heard this story at the time it was told would have laughed.

In a society where the preponderance of people were in dire poverty, the very thought of the rich man giving everything to the poor was ludicrous.

Jesus was not an ascetic and he did not call his followers to be ascetics. What Jesus forces the rich man to do is risk his identity. Will he define himself as an affluent leader in the community, or will his fundamental alliance be with those who are poor and oppressed? Will his purpose in life be to maintain the lifestyle he has become accustomed to, or will his purpose be to uplift the lifestyle of the dispossessed?

Now please do not misunderstand me. The problem is **not** that he is wealthy. The problem is that his wealth defines him. He only understands himself in terms of his wealth and his wealth is a barrier to the rest of humanity. His wealth is a wall that separates him from the needs of the common masses. He is not willing to risk his self-understanding or his public image for the disenfranchised.

Now here is another bit of tough news for the rich ruler. I would guess that this wealthy Jewish ruler was well known. He would be considered a “pillar” in his community. I do not doubt that he financially supported the temple and his home synagogue with great generosity. But that does not constitute the charity that Jesus was talking about.

Likewise we tend to think of the church as a charity. That is what the IRS calls it. But in truth, the church is an institution made up of volunteer members. John Killinger has written a book, *Seven Things They Don't Tell You in Seminary*. One of them is that churches are institutions, not spiritual centers. The church has a mission and purpose worthy of your financial support. You support this institution because it shares and propagates the values that you share and which you believe are necessary for our society. You might support it because it is a genuine community of hope and friendship. You might support it because it offers significant opportunities for community service. Like any institution it owns property and buildings that must be maintained. Every institution has leadership and support staff, just as we call a minister and hire people for the church's program and administration. But not a single person on our church's payroll is a charity case. We are professionals whose purpose is to help the institution remain viable. Your commitment to the church and your financial contributions to the church do not substitute for charitable work amongst the poor.

Belonging to a religious community is important, but only if it leads to an answer to the rich ruler's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Where can I find the center of value? Where can I immerse

myself in the essences of meaning? Where can I find God? How do I find eternal life in the community of sacrifice and generosity?

Eternal life is found amongst those who suffer and amongst those who seek to relieve the suffering. Eternal life is found in the work of justice. This is what the gospel of Jesus is all about. This is the church's ultimate mission.

Why is it that so many congregations are lifeless and emaciated? I submit it is because such churches think of maintenance instead of ministry. They think of the bottom line instead of the gospel mission. They think of the minimum pledge instead of generosity. They think that the church is about growth instead of making disciple. They think that Christian education is about information instead of wisdom. They think that spirituality is about comfort rather than obedience.

Vital congregations rise from their religious comfort zones and practices and meet the eternal in the heart of suffering. Vital congregations step out from the shadow of their church steeple and enter the mainstream of human need. Only if they are willing to rise up from their padded pews and hold hands with the poor and oppressed, the diseased and the disenfranchised will they enter the kingdom of God.

The story is told of three young people who went to the cave of the prophet, Elijah. They asked him, “Rabbi, where can we find the Messiah?”

Elijah replied, “Oh, that is well known. The Messiah can be found at the gates of the city. He lives among the lepers there.”

“But how shall we know him?” the youths persisted.

“Ah, that is a harder question,” pondered the prophet. “Like all the lepers at the city gates, the Messiah will be wrapped in bandages. You will have to watch how they bathe. Most lepers will unwrap all of their bandages at once. They will wash their bandages and hang them up to dry. Then they will wash their bodies. Finally they will rewrap their wounds”

“But the Messiah will only remove and wash one bandage at a time. You see, the Messiah is constantly thinking, ‘I must be ready in case someone has need of me. I must be prepared to minister to those who are afraid and those who are dying.’ That is where you will find the Messiah.”

If you are looking for the Messiah and seeking an answer to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” rise up from these pews and go to the city gates. Seek out the lepers of Wichita and serve them.

Make their cause your own. Elevate their humanity. Repair the injustices done to them. Preach good news to the poor. Proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. Go from this house of worship and release the oppressed!

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