

What Must I do to Inherit Eternal Life?

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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A funny Peanuts comic strip from way-back-when featured Lucy telling Linus how she was intending to grow up one day and be a queen and live in a big house and even wear her crown while swimming! Linus shatters her daydream with the sad news that you have to be born into a royal family to be a queen. Lucy gets very angry and announces that she intends to work very, very hard and make lots of money, so that she can buy herself a queendom and kick out the old queen . . . so that she can live in a very big house and wear her crown while swimming. In our very short Gospel reading today, Jesus is nearing Jerusalem and the cross. A young man approaches Him who in many ways is like Lucy in his intentions.

St. Mark does not name him but describes him as rich, young, and a ruler. He has everything, but he appears to be the very opposite of the type of person that Jesus has just described who will enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus has just taught in the preceding verses that a person should enter the kingdom of heaven like a little child. One should be humble, trusting, dependent, and lowly. In the description of this man as young may work here, but rich and ruler doesn't.

Now, the rich, young man shows due deference to Jesus. He kneels before Jesus, but I question his motives here when he addressed Jesus as ***"Good Teacher."*** Words mean a lot to God, and Jesus doesn't accept the words this man

used without a powerful comment. Now, Jesus was a teacher, a rabbi, but that title was used by the Pharisees grudgingly and snidely to address Jesus. And Jesus questioned the adjective, **“Good.”** Jesus says, **“Good?”** You see, there’s only one way Jesus could be good—if He were the one true God, who alone is good. Does this young man who was kneeling in deference to Jesus, recognize Jesus as God, or is the young man toying with Jesus? Is this man claiming that Jesus is God in the flesh or not? Jesus challenges him, **“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone”** (v 18).

God Himself had laid bare His description of humans back in Genesis 6. God used these words about humans just before the great flood saying, **“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”** (Gen 6:5). And this wasn’t an isolated Scripture passage. We hear in Psalm 14:3: **“They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”** Most of us would prefer these words to be an instance of classic Hebrew hyperbole. But God inspired these words as the absolute truth about us humans. So anyone coming to Him and calling Him good had better acknowledge the fact that in saying **“Good”** they are addressing Yahweh, God in the flesh, AND not an ordinary sinful, human. The only human who was truly good.

It doesn’t seem that the young man recognized Jesus as God from the question he asked Jesus. Even though he may have been a “ruler” (that is a lay leader) in his local synagogue, he didn’t know the truth about God and man.

He didn't know the truth about who was good and who was sinful. He didn't seem to have read Scripture, particularly the words of Isaiah: 64:6: ***"our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment."*** (You students of the Bible know the real meaning of "a polluted garment.") The young man was still under the assumption that what we humans do measures up to God's standard of goodness. In fact, all our human deeds of "goodness" are sins in the eyes of God. Otherwise, the young would have not asked what HE could do to inherit (that is to merit or earn) eternal life. (Remember, we have just learned that Jesus said our salvation our eternal life was a gift from God and not an earned reward.) This young man thought he still had some wiggle room to do something to earn heaven, and so he asked, ***"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"*** (v 17). Last week, in the verses immediately preceding our text, Jesus said God's kingdom was a gift, something to be received: ***"Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"*** (10:15). This week the rich young man's question: ***"What must I do?"*** (10:17) tells us it is impossible to use or trust in anything to acquire or receive the gift of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, I might point out that is one thing that all other great religions agree on. In all the great religions - If there is eternal life, it is given only to a person who is worthy of it; not an unworthy person. (Islam has its required Five Pillars; Buddhists have the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path; Taoists have The Way). In all the great religions, humans are the actors trying to benefit and be rewarded by a deity except in Christianity where it is the direct opposite. Our God is the actor and we are the ones who receive the benefit and are rewarded. So the young man's

question comes down to this: ***“Just tell me what I need to do.”*** I WILL DO IT. Sounds a bit haughty doesn't it? Sounds like a person who is in charge. A person who has power. A person who is a bit full of him (or her) self. Whatever needs to be done, just tell me and I will take charge and get it done. Doesn't sound like a child at all, does it?

Isn't it striking, what Jesus gives this young man as an answer? He turns to the Second Table of the Law. He runs through the commandments. Jesus purposefully picks Commandments 5 (murder), 6 (adultery), 7 (theft), and 8 (false speech) and then possibly alludes to nine and ten (desire and defrauding), which was peculiar to wealthy people of that time, before ending with Commandment 4 (honoring parents) which you may remember was the issue about Corban in which parents were neglected and the money kept as a ruse for God that could have been used to support them. All of these falls in the Second Table, ***“love your neighbor as yourself”*** All of them were easily verifiable in conduct but had deeper more sinister implications like hate, jealousy, swearing, cheating, gossip, leering, and many others. Jesus reminded the young man (a ruler, probably in his synagogue) that he already knew what to do. It is clear in the Law. He, and you and I, are to obey the Law. We are to love our neighbor. And it was true the young man knew this. The young man had been brought up well. He knew what God commanded in the Law. He knew that he was to love his neighbor as himself. Jesus was holding up a mirror for the man to see the truth about himself. But there was a big problem, the man was so blind that he utterly missed it. He says, ***“All these, I have kept from my youth.”*** (v 20). Did you catch that? ALL THESE commandments I have kept. Note the contrast

between this young man and the assessment by God in Genesis: ***“the thoughts of his heart [are] only evil continually”*** vs. what the young man said: ***“all these I have kept.”*** And do you see the supreme irony that the young man is standing in front of the only Son of Adam and Eve who can truthfully make the claim that the young man makes, ***“All these I have kept.”***

It's like the story of a pastor who told his congregation that on the next Sunday he was going to preach on lying and that to prepare for his sermon He wanted all the congregation to read and meditate on Mark 17. The following Sunday, the pastor asked how many people had read Mark 17 and everyone raised their hands. The Pastor smiled and said, ***“The Gospel of Mark has only 16 chapters.”***

Jesus was the only one who truly did keep the commandments from his youth! But the young man is not ready to see that Jesus stands apart from him. He doesn't see that Jesus is “good” in a way that he is not.

It is most striking, that when the young man answers Jesus with the words, ***“all these I have kept,”*** Jesus does not scorn or shame the young man. Our text says: ***“Jesus, looking at him, loved him”*** (v 21). He pitied the young man's great blindness and self-deception of not seeing his own sinfulness and imagining that he too is “good.” And, in love, Jesus gave him the gift he needed most. Jesus turns to the Law, again, and this time addressed the first Table of the Ten Commandments. (The love of God.) Jesus said, ***“You lack one thing.”*** And the young man wonders, ***“And what was that?”*** You can almost see the young man

leaning in, listening, waiting for the one last thing he could do to secure his eternal future. ***“Just tell me,”*** his eager face declared. But then the shocking words: ***“Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”*** (v 21). That one thing was not poverty or even charity to his neighbors; the one thing was ***“fear, love, and trust”*** in God above all other things temporal and spiritual and then to follow Jesus to the cross. It is because Jesus loves him (and us) that he speaks the hard words that reveal the truth.

The disappointment and horror are written across the young man’s face. A wealthy young man who had lots and lots of stuff. A man who couldn’t see parting with it all. A reasonable amount is given away to the poor, yes. But all? What kind of a person could do that? We live in Loudoun County. The median income in this county is the highest in the nation at \$151,800. The median value of the houses in this county is \$658,000. Jesus is speaking to us too. Jesus is saying that the snowblowers and riding lawn mowers; the gargantuan TVs and the robotized vacuums; the expensive cars, clothes, jewelry, and furniture will not be of any use to us in getting to heaven. Neither will our Money Market accounts, our IRAs, our abundant pensions, our government annuities, or our stock dividends. Our wealth, our power, our status, our prestige, none of it, including our standing in our church, will help us gain heaven. We need to stop making them our god and turn to Jesus. We need to give them up as our god and follow Jesus.

Look who is speaking to us today in His Word – the Gospel. Look who is seeing us today and issuing an invitation to us just as He issued it to a rich, young ruler, 2,000 years ago.

Here stands Jesus speaking to us, the truly wealthy one—and the truly Good One. Though He was rich, yet for our sake, He became poor so that through His poverty we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). Jesus invited the young man and us to leave all his stuff behind (stuff he and we will have to leave behind when we die anyway) and follow along with Jesus as He goes to His cross—where our Lord will give away all that He has to us poor sinners, where He will make His unbroken “yes” to the will of the Father. To the cross where His perfection in keeping every commandment will replace our violating every one of them. On the cross where He will gain for Himself treasure in heaven—you and me—by suffering and dying to forgive our sins, including our sins of forgetting again and again that He alone is our true and lasting treasure.

All the young man sees at that moment is his own failure. Now, like us, it is true that he hadn't kept all these commandments because he hadn't even kept the First Commandment. He'd let his stuff become his god. And seeing only his failure, he walks away sad. The English word “Disheartened” was translated from a Greek word that suggests that the face falls, a sense of sadness and shock that register on the countenance of the person. That's how it ends with all who think that what they do is how they inherit eternal life. They end up walking away sad. Because, of course, they can't inherit life that way, and so they believe that there is no life for them. But they are wrong! Jesus tells us eternal life is a gift. It can't be earned. It can't be deserved by any sinful human being. Jesus came to give it freely to poor sinners who confess they could never do enough to deserve it. We sinners have been sinful from the beginning of our lives like this young man.

BUT, beloved people of God, how utterly unnecessary to walk away sad from Jesus because He shows us that we haven't kept the commandments. How much better to stay on our knees before Him and beg for His mercy precisely because our hearts are sinful from our youth! How much wiser to admit that we have had other gods and that we are entirely too attached to our stuff. How much better to beg the mercy and forgiveness of our King! How much more blessed to join the wise thief on the cross and say to your King who died to cover all our sins: *"We are only getting what we deserve, but you have done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!"* For then we, too, will hear with the thief the shocking words of grace: ***"Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise"*** (Lk 23:41–42, 43).

Even though we could never earn or deserve it, Jesus was delighted to GIVE us eternal life as a free gift. As you (kneel before OR come forward, before your King today and you receive into your mouth His body and blood, which He shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins, He gives you right now a foretaste and promised guarantee that eternal life is and will be yours. Because the very one who becomes one with you in the Holy Communion is the Only Good One is the same one who took joy in granting you and me what we could never earn by anything we did on our own. He gave us as an inheritance – a free gift – eternal life for following Him even though we did not deserve it. And for that, all glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and to the ages of ages! Amen.