

Seeking Sermon Series

What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life? - Mark 10:17-31

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One of my favorite things about the start of Lent is the beginning of a new Pastor's Class. After lunch today, 12 youth and I will gather together to talk about the basics of faith, with the goal of preparing them to make the important decision about being baptized. I won't be providing any pre-packaged lessons or pat answers. Instead, I will be helping the youth ask their questions.

And let me tell you, they have questions! So many in fact that I had to create a way for them to ask those questions without completely sidetracking the class. Behold the Chalice of Awesomeness! Don't look too closely or you might fall in. Each class, I provide pencils and post-it notes and ask the youth to write down their questions and put them in the Chalice of Awesomeness, and then at the end of each class we go through the questions. They range from the deeply curious, like "Is God a man or woman?" to the somewhat silly, like "Will my head fit in the Chalice of Awesomeness?" I'm not sure what to expect from this class, but I guarantee these youth have questions.

I bet you do, too. You may not feel comfortable asking them, you may feel ashamed or embarrassed to admit it, but I bet you could fill the Chalice of Awesomeness with your questions. Here at Crestwood, one of the points of our mission statement is that we invite questions about how faith and life intersect, because we believe asking our questions is a part of growing our faith. I promise there are no dumb questions when it comes to faith, but we also have to accept that there are not always easy answers, and sometimes there is no answer at all. If you're OK with that, then it's OK to ask your questions.

That permission goes back to biblical times. Those who saw Jesus in the flesh had a lot of questions, despite Jesus' attempt to help them understand who he was. The gospels are littered with questions from those who encountered Jesus, so for our Lenten sermon series we're going to stand beside the question-askers and add our voices to the queries. After all, from the gospels to now, we are all still seeking to know God better.

We start with a question I bet we all have asked. "How do I inherit eternal life?" Another way to ask this is, "How do I get to heaven?" And right away I have to tell you, I do NOT like Jesus' answer. There's no explaining away the bluntness of his words to the rich young ruler. I wish I could tell you that when Jesus says, "sell what you own" the original Greek actually translates to "sell what you no longer need but keep the good stuff." But it doesn't. I can't tell you the Israelites owned really small camels and sewed with really big needles. This passage is what it is. One commentator said, "If this message does not take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved, or amazed, we have either heard it so much that we don't hear it anymore, or we've not heard it enough."

I have strong personal reasons for struggling with this passage. Not many people know this, but at one time I was fairly wealthy. My accumulation of assets started slow, with a little money in the bank and the purchase of few meager properties. It wasn't much, but at least I got free parking. Then, I bought a railroad and even a utility company, not to mention a couple hotels. I had a shiny silver car and a fancy top hat. I was not afraid to take a chance, even if it meant on occasion going directly to jail. It seemed like every time I turned a corner, someone

was handing me \$200. But then, the game ended, and I had to put all the Monopoly money back in the box.

Obviously, the man in our story isn't ready to give up his wealth so easily, but otherwise, is there really anything wrong with him? Sounds to me like he's done an awful lot of things right. He could have been anyone we know, wearing a sharp three-piece suit and power tie, working his way through life to provide for his family, saving and investing and splurging every once in a while. He approaches Jesus and offers him a sign of respect by bowing before him. This is a good person, an honest person. You know, like us.

He gives us some insight into his situation: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Inherit" – ahh, that's a wealthy person's word, isn't it? He's not asking, "Where can I serve the unhoused this week?" or "When can I join the next Habitat build?" He knows he's followed the law. But he feels something isn't right. He doesn't have that sense of peace about his faith portfolio. There's got to be something else he can do to make sure he's on the elevator going up instead of down. There's got to be one more thing he can check off his spiritual to-do list that will ensure a reserved seat at the banquet table. He has the means, he has the desire, all he needs from Jesus is the name to write on the check so he can add "eternal life" to his list of assets.

But to solve this problem, this man doesn't need addition, but subtraction. Jesus looks at him with love, not condemnation, and sees the illness in need of a cure. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." What would you do? This man says...no. Did you know that this is the only place in scripture where Jesus' call is refused? This man could have been a history maker, he could have written a gospel, he could have drunk wine that was just water a few minutes ago, if only he could have un-shackled himself. As we see in our world over and over again, relinquishing power and wealth is the hardest for those who have the most power and wealth to relinquish. But salvation is not for sale, so the man turns his back on Jesus.

Jesus has a way of making a mess of people's tidy little faith, doesn't he? It seems like he's always putting down the good guys, like the law-abiding Pharisees, and lifting up the ne'er-do-wells, like tax collectors and lame beggars. And when he has Mr. Moneybags right in front of him, the guy who could bankroll his ministry for the foreseeable future, he doesn't say, "You want eternal life? Here's a pledge card" or "Getting into heaven? A big donation to the capital campaign wouldn't hurt." Instead, he tells him to get rid of the one thing that means the most to this man. If you're brave enough to ask Jesus a question, you better be prepared for the answer.

This rich young man was a fan of Jesus. He'd heard the stories, seen the crowds, knew that Jesus was doing some pretty cool stuff. And he asks the question, "What's in it for me?" So he excitedly bounds up to Jesus like a groupie looking for an autograph. But being excited about religion isn't the same as trusting in Christ. You see, Jesus isn't looking for fans. He's looking for followers. This man was eager to make sure his spiritual ledger leaned to the positive side, but not interested in truly following Jesus.

So, what are we? Fans or followers? Do we have our spiritual to-do lists? Go to church, make a pledge, pray (when I remember), do something nice for someone. Look, those are all good things and if you're doing them, I hope you keep doing them. But that doesn't necessarily make you a follower of Jesus. This man who comes to Jesus is a respectable man, he's fulfilled the commandments to not cheat or steal or murder. It's respectable to never take anything away from someone. But it is Christ-like to reach out and give something to someone, especially something of value to you.

Does that mean for us to move from being a fan to being a follower, we have to sell all we have and give the money to the poor? (Pause) Nope. Shew! Jesus isn't giving that command to us. Jesus wasn't laying down poverty as a requirement for everyone. The Great Physician doesn't write everyone the same prescription. But for this man, the thing that stood between him and God, the thing that kept him at arm's length from Jesus, the thing that held him back from following was his wealth. And, Jesus says, that's what has to go. So...what has to go for us to move from fan to follower?

If our goal is to be a fan of Jesus, then we can probably keep doing what we're doing. We'll lead respectable lives that way. But if we want to be a follower of Jesus, then we might need to take a closer look at what stands between us and God. What's in the way? On overloaded schedule? A fear of doing something wrong? A feeling of inadequacy? Wealth? Or are we, like the man, looking for what else we have to DO to inherit eternal life? Our eternal life is not a prize to be won. It's a gift, a gift given to us freely by God. And in return, we give God a gift, the gift of our lives, the gift of giving to others, the gift of following Jesus' lead in loving and serving.

This is not a story about how money is bad. The Bible tells us about several people who stayed wealthy and followed Jesus, because for them, their wealth was a means, not an end. But those folks had to leave something else behind – a consuming career, an unhealthy relationship, an addiction, a “what's in it for me?” attitude. What we have to leave behind may not necessarily be bad, it's just in the way. Compared to being a follower of Jesus, to doing God's work in this world, it just isn't that important. As pastor John Ortberg reminds us, at the end of the game, it's all going to go back in the box. So how can we use what we have now to get us closer to God?

This is hard stuff, but then again, Jesus never said following him would be easy. Faith is a choice, and it's rarely an easy one. Wouldn't it be great if we could stay rich or stay comfortable or stay uninvolved and still be a follower? But we can't, can we? There are days when stuffing a camel through a needle sounds easier than following Jesus. Can we do it? Can we be more Christ-like today than we were yesterday? Can we use what God has given us to make a difference in this world? Can we be, not fans of Jesus, but followers? Some days it just feels impossible. Well, it is impossible, if we try to do it alone. Thankfully, we're not alone. For God, all things are possible.