

JESUS' ANSWER TO LIFE'S GREATEST QUESTION

Luke 18:18–34

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We've been traveling along in the Gospel of Luke and today, for this Easter Sunday, I invite you to turn with me to Luke 18. We will read from verse 18 through verse 34.

“A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ‘Why do you call me good?’ Jesus answered. ‘No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’” ‘All these I have kept since I was a boy,’ he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ Those who heard this asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus replied, ‘What is impossible with men is possible with God.’ Peter said to Him, ‘We have left all we had to follow you!’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus said to them, ‘no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.’ Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, ‘We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day, he will rise again.’ The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning

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was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about” (Luke 18:18–34, NIV).

My message today deals with Jesus’ answer to life’s greatest question.

Last summer, I had one of the greatest experiences of my life. I’d always wanted to do it and it came to pass. I got down to the Sinai Peninsula and had the opportunity to climb the traditional Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law, when Israel was in the wilderness. As the sun set on that day that we were camping out at the base of Sinai and the evening stars began to appear, I looked up into the dark blue heavens and it seemed as though there were as many stars as there were snowflakes. It was like being in an outdoor cathedral, sparkled by a million pinpoints of dazzling white lights. I had never realized in all my life that there were so many stars up there in the heavens. It was an awesome moment, and I understood why people in the desert often have such great encounters with God.

As I came back to Southern California and looked up into the night sky—first of all, if you can see it, you’re lucky. And then, if you do see it, there just don’t seem to be many stars out there and they don’t seem to be bright. It sort of seems like someone turned down the rheostats on the stars. I thought, “Why is this so?” It struck me that the reason why we do not see the stars here in Southern California like you do in the Sinai is, not because there are fewer stars, but because there are so many earth lights and there is so much earth exhaust that the heavens themselves, from our vantage point, are affected.

I think that probably describes the way a lot of things are in life: Earth can obscure our view of God. That’s why, when I read the today’s Scripture, I find a man who is looking at the heavens and wanting to know about eternal life. His focus is clear. Granted, there is a time and a place to consider earth questions. But often we are so bogged down in living, we fail to get the sweep of

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the whole. Maybe you've come today with an earth question and the Lord instead wants you to focus on an eternal question. Earth questions that you may be wrestling with are: "How do I make ends meet? How do I get ahead? How do I deal with anger? How can I overcome an inferiority complex? How can I get a resolution to conflict in my home? How can I communicate? How can I build self-esteem and self-worth?" All these are important issues, but they're earth issues. The Scripture lifts us to an eternal issue with the understanding that, when we get a hold of the eternal issue, we are more able then to look at the earth issues.

So we have this rich young ruler. He's called that. Actually, the different Gospels give us different phases of him. Matthew calls him "young." And Luke calls him a "ruler." All three of the first three Gospels tell us he was rich. And Mark tells us that, out of respect for Jesus, when he came, he knelt down when he asked this question. I want to focus on several things within this encounter that he has with Jesus:

I. The first thing I want to focus on is that he came to the right person.

There are lots of people that we can go to to get helpful advice for dealing with life's problems. People come to me as a pastor, and they go to a counselor. We all get help in various kinds of ways, but when we've got an eternal question on our mind, who can we go to? The fact that you're here today, on Easter Sunday, signifies that two-thousand years have come and gone and yet people are still looking, as this rich young ruler did, to Jesus for an answer to the most basic questions. Come to the right person.

When we want to know about life after death, we don't go to Mohammed or Buddha or Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud or Dale Carnegie or even Phil Donahue. We come to Jesus. The words of Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Jesus

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Himself tells us, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). So this rich young ruler ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him. He had come to the right person.

II. The second thing we should note about this story is he came at the right time.

He was young. And Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. That's a marvelous juxtaposition of events, for Jesus is days away from laying down His life. This is the young man's last chance to be numbered with those who followed Jesus when He was in the flesh. It's a perfect time to join Jesus' company, and Jesus is showing us that latecomers are just as welcome as the people who had been with Him during the entire three years.

And it's a perfect time in his life—he's young. I don't know if anybody had as crazy a childhood or has done as stupid things as I have done, but I think young people are interested in eternal life.

The fact that he asked the question about eternal life shows that young people are not just waiting to retire to ask that kind of question. As a teenager, there were many occasions when I had gone out into a park and laid down on the grass underneath a tree and looked up into the blue heavens and the clouds and thought, as I was lying there, "I wonder when they're going to put me under this grass instead of on top of it? How long will I live? What will it feel like six feet under? I sure hope they don't get me in the casket when I'm still alive but comatose. [Have you ever had that go through your mind? That's one of my mortal fears: That they put me there when I was comatose and I'd wake up and try to get out.] When's that going to happen to me? Can I live forever?"

This young man was concerned about it. A young person said, "I wonder what I was begun for when I am so soon done for." Longfellow said it more poetically and beautifully, "All life is brief. What now is bud will soon be leaf. What now is leaf will soon decay. The blue eggs in the

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robin's nest will soon have wings and beak and breast and flutter and fly away. Too soon. Too soon the noon will be the afternoon. Too soon. Today be yesterday."

Woody Allen is a man that likes to make people laugh. He had an interview recently where he disclosed his morbid preoccupation with death. He claims to be an atheist. In a philosophical moment, he soared to language like this, "The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror and it renders everyone's accomplishments meaningless. It's not only that man dies. But that your struggle to do a work of art that will last and then realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time is sort of depressing, isn't it? To be involved in something, a work of art, then the work itself isn't going to last because the universe isn't going to last."

A sensitive interviewer seeking to comfort Woody said, "But aren't you happy that you will achieve immortality through your achievements?" Woody Allen answered, "Who cares about achieving immortality through achievements? I'm interested in achieving immortality through not dying."

That's exactly where this man in the Gospel story is. He came to the right person and he nailed the right question.

III. That's the third part. He not only went to the right person at the right time but he asked the right question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

I don't think we have any mental categories to understand eternity, simply because there is no analogy in our experience to understand it.

I had some fun last night. I was trying to figure out how old I was. I discovered that today, Easter Sunday, 1986, is the sixteen thousand two hundred and eightieth day of my life. That includes

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leap years. That's an exact number. How many know how old you are in terms of days? Nobody in this room knows how really old you are. But I know. I thought, "That's a long time." Then I thought, "Can I reach a hundred thousand?" I realize I'm not going to get to a hundred thousand, even if they do a heart transplant on me, even if they do a brain transplant (which, Lord knows, I need!). I'm not going to make it to a hundred thousand .

Christ has been risen for over seven hundred and fourteen thousand days. I've only lived sixteen thousand two hundred and eighty of them. How many days is eternity? How long and how far out does it go? I'm interested. I'm interested in not only quantity of life but quality of life. When you talk about eternal life, some people have the feeling of, "This life is so bad. Who would ever want to live forever?" I identify with that. Yes, there are days like that. But the thing about the eternal life that Jesus offers is not only its quantity, but its quality. I'd like a quality eternal life. I think of all the questions you could ask Jesus, this one would be the most important. It's interesting that people in the Gospels asked Jesus questions. The religious hypocrites come to Him and they never ask Him the fundamental questions. Their heart is far away from God so, therefore, they're trying to dodge God with questions. We have that. "You say the Bible is true. Why does it say this or that?" The Pharisees were saying to Jesus, "What about washing your hands before you eat?" Big question. They walked a hundred miles to ask Him that question. It was a big question. "Just under what circumstances can you chuck your wife?" They wanted to know about that too.

Here's a man who comes with an authentic question. Bull's-eye! And it's a perfect question to ask somebody who's risen from the dead. In the whole human race, there's only one person who's ever risen again from the dead—Jesus. So if you're going to ask Him a question, that's a good question to ask.

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IV. The fourth thing about this story that we ought to notice is that not only did this young man come to the right person, come at the right time and ask the right question, but Jesus gave him the right answer.

It's an answer that surprises us. We would expect Jesus to flow out with words like the ones he said to Nicodemus: "The way you get into the kingdom of God is you become a child. Except you be born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus uses different language with different people, because different needs are being addressed. Jesus knows that what stands between this young man and his entering into kingdom life and being born again is his attachment to the earth. He needs to make a fundamental break in his loyalty. So the Lord touched his assets, that are his gods. And the Lord has already taught that you cannot serve two masters, you can only serve one. The Lord says, "If you want life, get rid of everything, give it to the poor, come and follow Me." He lays his finger upon the deepest need of this man's life for a response.

The Lord has different things to say to each one of us about the things that separate us from Him. It may be the Lord would say to us, "You need to stop living in immorality and give your life to Me." It may be that the Lord would say, "You need to give up bitterness in your life and come be born again, follow Me." Whatever it is, the Lord can identify it. What's standing between us and Him?

He does so with this young man. Jesus Himself is on the way to the cross in Jerusalem. So He's not asking him to do anything that He Himself has not done. He has laid down everything. He was rich, but He became poor. And even His last piece of property, His tunic, is going to—in a few days—be gambled away in Jerusalem. So He's saying to this young man, if you're going to get in on things, come now.

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True Christianity is not a mental assent. It's not saying, "Jesus, I believe in You," and then going acting as though He never rose from the dead. It's like marriage. When you stand at a marriage altar, the minister is not asking if you believe in somebody, but if you will commit to somebody. If you walk away from that marriage altar saying, "I believe she's my wife," and then go on and live like a single person, your belief has not affected your behavior. Therefore, it's not a valid belief.

The Lord is saying to him, "Your belief has got to impact how you behave, how you live." He asks him for this commitment.

Jesus knows that, if this man will receive this eternal answer—this right answer—it will change the way he lives on earth. He will find that, while before he thought he was rich, it was only poverty. You and I know that riches are not anything that's outside of you, that is, something you own. It's something that's in you. If you're rich in your relationship with God and you're rich in relationships with people and you have love and joy and peace in your life, you are rich.

Which brings us to the fifth part of this scriptural lesson today. He came to the right person, he came at the right time, he asked the right question, he got the right answer and...

V. He made the wrong decision.

"He went away sad, for he had great possessions." There was a stumbling block in his path. Jesus had asked him to give something up and, in obedience, to commit to Him and follow Him.

When I think of a contemporary counterpart to the rich young ruler, I probably think of Elvis Presley. At one point in his life, he was very drawn to giving his life to Jesus Christ. He, at times, sang in the church choir at First Assembly of God in Memphis, Tennessee. He flirted in and out with becoming a Christian in those early years, before he began rock. Then, of course, we all know his sad fate, dying on an overdose of drugs. He sang, shortly before his death, a Paul Anka

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tune. It's sort of the song of the rich young ruler. It says, "Now the end is near and so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case of which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full, I've traveled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way. But what is man? What has he got? If not himself, then he has got to say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels. The records show I took the blows and did it my way."

I think that's what the rich young ruler probably said by the time he was an rich old ruler. "I took the blows. I did it my way." There's something sorrowful about that. The melody is mournful as are the words. The undertone is sadness. Contradiction to the brave front the man has put up. Like the rich young ruler, we will wind up with a bottom line of sadness if we do it our way rather than His way.

The great poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning had a poem about a young woman who was deeply in love with a struggling young artist. But the problem was that the young artist wanted to be famous and the young woman wanted wealth. They knew that if they got married it would be a while before he got fame and they had money and she didn't want to wait, even though she knew she loved him. He knew that if they got married he would have to spend time with her and would not have the intensity to devote to his artistic career, so they went their separate ways. And time went by and he became a world famous artist. And she married an older, wealthier man. Years later, their paths crossed in life. She looks at the artist, who had once been so dearly loved by her when they were young, and she says to him these words, "Nobody calls me a dunce and people suppose you clever. This could have happened but once and we missed it, lost it forever."

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That's how the rich young ruler later happened to feel. That moment, he intersected Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. This could have happened but once. Jesus was only going that way once and you've only got one life to live, once. He made the wrong choice.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus loved him. I don't know if we can adequately explain that. Maybe the best way I can explain it is if my son or daughter said to me, "Dad, we're going to forget about being a member of your family and go our own way." The hardest thing I could experience is to see my son or daughter walk out the door on me. It would be the hardest thing that Jesus would go through, to see someone He dearly loved walk out the door on Him. He feels that, not only toward the rich young ruler, I believe He feels it toward every one of us. This man made the wrong choice. That doesn't mean we have to make the wrong choice. He made the wrong choice. Jesus did not coerce him. Nor did He reduce His terms. When he started to go, He didn't say, "Wait! Let's negotiate this." Jesus is the Lord of life and He doesn't negotiate His conditions. But He dearly loves. He won't twist your arm. But He will invite.

The sequel of this story: the disciples are astounded that Jesus has said this bit about "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go into the kingdom of God." They say, "Well, who then can be saved?" Jesus says, "It's impossible with man, but with God it's possible. There are people who misunderstand what Jesus is saying and say, "In the Aramaic, camel is a rope and Jesus is talking about a rope going through a needle's eye, and it's a little tough to get a rope in a needle's eye, but it can be done if the needle is the right size." There are others who say, "No, the needle's eye is a place in the city gate. The camel gets down on and creeps through the gate."

Jesus' point is: it's impossible for the camel to go through the needle's eye. Saying "the rich man," therefore, means every man. Every woman. "With man it is impossible but with God all

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things are possible.” That’s why the cross. That’s why the resurrection. None of us can, by our own self-effort, achieve eternal life. We need it as a gift from God.

So Jesus very clearly states, “With man it’s not possible but with God it’s possible to have eternal life.”

What if this rich young ruler had said yes? There would have been some things different about him. For one thing, we would have known his name. Has it ever struck you in reading the story that he has no name? He has no name because he dropped out of sight, dropped out of Christ’s sight. If he’d stayed with Christ, he would’ve had a name, like Peter and James and John and Andrew and Philip and Bartholomew and Matthew and Thomas and James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James or the others. He would’ve had a name. And his life would have been turned inside out. He would have gained. His material benefits would have gone to others, but he would have been wealthy, because he would have been a follower of Jesus. Wealthy in all that this truly means.

We call him the rich young ruler. That’s really now a joke. Every one of us in this room is richer than him. He never rode in a car. He never had surgery. The rich young ruler never turned on a light. He never bought penicillin. He never heard a pipe organ. He never watched TV. He never washed dishes in running water. He never typed a letter. He never mowed a lawn. He never flew an airplane. He never slept on an innerspring mattress or a waterbed. And he never talked on the phone. And he was rich? No, just within his culture.

Time has a way of putting a different slant on things. We look at him now and say, “He wasn’t rich at all, because he missed everything.” He could have known Jesus and been His follower and he missed it.

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Jesus knew that there was a spiritual dynamic waiting to be released in his life. This young man had lived passively. When Jesus quotes him the Commandments, he doesn't quote him the first part of the Decalogue, the ten words about honoring God. He quotes to him the part about, "Do not lie...do not steal...do not commit adultery." That's the problem with this guy's life. It'd been a passive life, a life of ease. Not a life of involvement and activity. He was able to say to Jesus, "I don't smoke and I don't chew and I don't go with girls who do." He's able to say, "This is what I haven't done in my life. Aren't I good?" And Jesus says, "There's a whole life ahead of you. Do something with it. Invest it. Use it. You've got something to offer. You're sitting there on your checking account and you don't realize that it's not your bank book that I want, it's you that I want. You're more valuable than your money. Chuck the money and follow Me."

That's how Jesus feels about each one of us. You're more valuable than what you have and you've got something to offer. Come follow Me.

Jesus says, "If you follow Me, you'll even get a new family. You'll have brothers and sisters and houses and lands." He's talking about the community that's made by the Cross.

Best of all, if he had followed Jesus, he would have had eternal life. In that first Sunday, at evening time, the disciples were meeting behind closed doors and Jesus appeared to them and they were startled and frightened, supposing they had seen a spirit. But He said to them, "Peace." And after they had satisfied themselves that it was Him, He did a very unusual thing. The Gospel of John tells us He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Spirit." What Jesus was doing in that moment was reenacting Genesis, the creation of man. God bent over the lump of clay and breathed into that lump the breath of life and man became a living being. Jesus, now coming back from the grave, has a new order of life. Not "Adam" life, not earthly life. But eternal life.

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Just like CPR and mouth-to-mouth, where you breathe your air into someone else, Jesus is breathing the air of His new life into those first disciples, as He seeks to breathe it into all of us, that we might have resurrection life, eternal life, not just earth life.

If you're here today, you've come to the right person, you've come at the right time. I hope you've come with the right question, I know you'll get the right answer. I pray that you will make the right decision.

Closing Prayer

Father, to Jesus be all the glory and honor and praise. The one thing we don't want to miss in our life is following You. At whatever age we're at, whether young or old, the one thing we don't want to miss is following You and having You be Lord of our life. Lord, for those who are in this service this morning who have not made that step of inviting You to be Lord of their life, I pray that this Easter morning, as they are right now in prayer with me, that they would breathe out a prayer to You and would say, "Jesus, come into my life. Breathe Your life into me. Give me eternal life and whatever You tell me to do, I will do it." In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.