

SAY YES TO LIFE
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I've chosen an Easter text today that is a little unusual for Easter time but I think it represents the heart of the Easter message. It's from Mark's gospel, 10:17-22. "As Jesus started on his way a young man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, '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 murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.' 'Teacher,' he declared. 'All these I've kept since I was a boy.' Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.' At this the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth."

2 Corinthians 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor that you through his poverty might become rich."

I've learn in recent years the meaning of a term. It's called "the bottom line." When I was a young person I didn't know what that was. Now I understand it. When you're in business and you're trying to figure out where you're at in business and you add and subtract all the columns – the income and outgo – you're looking for the number that's at the bottom. It's a number that is either bracketed or without brackets. It's either in red or it's in black. It tells you whether you have a total profit or a total loss. It tells you where you're whole business is going. When you look at it you get the bottom line statement. It tells you what you want to know: is this whole thing paying off?

Life has its bottom line kinds of moments and bottom line sorts of questions. Easter is a bottom line event. Did all the activity lead to profit or loss? Life has a bottom line.

I reviewed some of the things I preached and taught about over the last few months. In looking at them I found that all of them were important but they weren't necessarily bottom lines. Things like How to overcome an Inferiority Complex, How to Improve our Marriage, How to be a Better Parent, How to Become a More Successful Person, How to Communicate so that the Real You Shows, How to Build Self Esteem and Self Worth, How to Deal With Anger, How to Have Wholesome Sexuality. All these questions important, but none as a bottom line question.

The bottom line question in today's text is, Is there any Future for me after Death? Do I have my eternal destiny? Do I know what's going to happen to me eternally?

Here is a young man who considers the bottom line. Because he had friends, he had money, he had position – he was known as a ruler – yet there was something he lacked. He knew that when he looked at the spreadsheet of his life that there was something missing and it was the bottom line.

So he did some things and we look in these moments at what he did. He, first of all, came to the right person with his need. There are lots of people who can give us helpful advice for dealing with life's problems. But when we are talking about life after death there's only one person we can turn to that has any answers. Buddha has some great answers about ethics. Mohammed has

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a perspective of life. Other persons have come long with psychological and moral theory. Fraud had his answers. Marx had his answers. Dale Carnegie, and Phil Donahue and Ann Landers have their answers. But when we're looking for the ultimate questions we have to look past Mohammed, past Buddha, past Marx, past Ann Landers, past Phil Donahue. To whom do we go?

Peter eloquently summarized it long ago when he stated, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me though he were dead yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

So if you're concerned about the bottom line of life you've come to the right person if you've come to Jesus. The young man showed his respect for Jesus by running up to him and kneeling in his presence.

In coming to the right person, secondly, this man came at the right time.

It was the right time for Jesus. Jesus was on his way to the cross. He was on his way to Jerusalem. Within days he would be on the cross. Within days he would be resurrected. It couldn't have been a better time for the young man to come and spend those last moments of Jesus' earthly ministry with him.

It was the right time for him. He was a young man. Anytime we come to Christ it is always the right time.

And especially to be commended in this young man is although he had everything in terms of an outward point of view he yet sensed that he lacked. He was honest. He had integrity. And he came.

I find that young persons are deeply concerned about the vital issues of life. They are concerned with more than making bucks or they're concerned with more than sex or they're concerned with more than just being a great guy or a great person or a great gal. Young people are concerned with vital issues. This young man was. He came at the right time.

I compare this young man's question with something I read some time ago about Woody Allen. Woody Allen was talking about his preoccupation with death. As an atheist he does not believe in human survival after death. In philosophical moments one time talking about death, he soared to language like this: "The fundamental thing behind all motivation and behind all activity is the constant struggle against animation and death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless. As Camu wrote "It's not only that he dies or that man dies but that you 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." The sensitive interviewer seeking to comfort Woody asked, "But aren't you happy that you will achieve immortality through your achievements?" And he replied "Who cares about achieving immortality through your achievements. I'm interested in achieving immortality through not dying."

He said it well. He realizes as a modern man and as an artist that his works will live after him, that his films will be around when he is gone, and yet he contemplates the time when the universe itself will be no more and if the universe is no more, his films are no more. Therefore his work isn't immortal and he's interested in achieving immortality through not dying. That's

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the kind of frame of reference of mind that motivates this young man in the gospels to come to Jesus. He comes at the right time. He has touched the mirror of life.

That leads us to the third thing about him. He comes with the right question.

What must *I* do to inherit eternal life? A great missionary to the Moslem world tells the story of walking by the seaside one day and there was an old Arab man setting by the shore and he was scooping up the sand with his hand and letting the grains of sand run through his hands. What are you doing? he was asked. He said, "I'm thinking. I'm thinking about eternity. Eternity is as if a bird would come a pick a grain of this sand and fly it to the other side of the ocean and return again next year and pick up another grain of sand and take it again to the other side of the ocean. And every year the bird would come back and take another grain of sand. And when the bird has successfully transplanted all the sand that is on this beach to the sand on distant shore, eternity would have only begun." A wise man!

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Of all the questions you could ask Jesus I think this is the most important. There are many people in the gospels that asked him all kinds of questions. Some of them peripheral, some of them argumentative, some of them evasive. Just like questions that may be asked today that may evade the real issues of life. Here is a young man who faces the real issue. So he comes to the right person, he comes at the right time, he comes with the right question.

And, fourth, he gets the right answer.

Jesus said, "Go sell all you have. Give to the poor and come follow me." Still today we're a little bit uncomfortable with that answer. It seems so very radical and it is. Extremely radical. What we must recognize about Jesus' answer is he never responds to two people in exactly the same way. We're all individuals. We all have our own fingerprints.

I saw on a television report the other day that they're working on a gizmo now that can tell your identity by your looking into a light that is beamed into your eye. There's a cornea print that each one has that's distinct. In future days when you're asked for identification you won't pull out your driver's license. You'll simply look into a beam and the computer can read your eye print and tell whether or not it's really you. Intriguing. We're all individual and unique.

So Jesus dealt with people individually and uniquely. He knows that what is standing in this young man's way of reality and eternal life is that there is something he loves more than God. There is something he puts above a commitment to God. And there is also this fact about the young man that all of his life had been lived sort of negatively. He was able to say, I don't do this, I don't do that. Jesus wanted him to *do* something with his life. His potential needed to be released instead of being a negative person, Jesus wanted to release him. And he was forcing him to radical action. Jesus always lays his finger on the things that keep us from putting him first and keep us from everlasting life. He may be laying his finger on some dimension of your life if you've never confessed him. He is confronting you today and saying to you "What is it that keeps you from coming to me?"

We get the right answer from Jesus. His words are so understandable. When he tells the young man to leave everything he's not asking him to do anything that Jesus himself hasn't done. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor." He

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became impoverished so that you through his poverty might be rich. Jesus had done it himself. He was on the way to the cross. It was perfectly consistent to ask another human being at that moment to join him on the greatest adventure that the world has ever know. The way to the cross.

This young man came to the right person, he came at the right time, he asked the question, he got the right answer and he made the wrong decision.

That's the kicker to the story. That's the O'Henry twist. He's not the only young man to have made a wrong decision. Newspapers in recent weeks have been filled with stories of people who have made wrong decisions. I think especially tragic the case of John Beluci who tells us in his life and through his death that the real answer is not in money or in fame or in sex or in drugs or he would have found the real answer to life.

Elvis Presley made famous this Paul Anka song several years before Elvis died. Elvis one time himself had really faced a decision to follow Christ or say no to the Lord. This song is kind of Elvis' sign off. It's a powerful song. He's saying things like "And 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." There's a certain kind of untruthfulness to that statement. "I've lived a life that's full." Anyone looking at Elvis' life and knowing what the potential could have been has problems with that statement. He signs off the song by saying "For 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 record shows, I took the blows, I did it my way."

There's something really sorrowful about that. The melody is mournful, the words are mournful. The undertone is sadness, a contradiction to the song. It's the underlying emotional tone denies everything that the words seem to be saying. I did it my way. As though there is something gallant about that.

Like the rich young ruler we wind up with the bottom line of sadness if we did it our way rather than Christ's way. I want to take a megaphone and yell through the corridor of time back to the rich young ruler as he turns his face away from Jesus. In that split second to walk in another direction. I want to say, Wait! That's the wrong choice. You don't know that you'd get everything if you stay. Giving it up is nothing. Stay!

That's the way we feel this Easter. Because Jesus lives. Because we realize that everything is in him. All the fullness of God, all the riches of eternity. All the power of God is in him.

Elizabeth Barret Browning tells the story of a young girl who was in love with a poor artist. She wanted money and wanted it quick. The artist wanted to be great. They decided that they weren't good for another because she couldn't get money rapidly and his love for her would prevent him from pursuing the time he would need to devote to his art. So she wound up marrying a richer and older man. The young man went on to become a famous artist. In the poem later in life they meet very dissatisfied with the way life has gone. The young girl now no longer young says to that man who had been her loved one at one time, the one man above all she had really loved. "Nobody calls you a dunce and people suppose me clever. This could have happened but once and we missed it, lost it forever."

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I think somehow that summarizes what I feel toward this story in the gospel today: "This could have happened but once and we missed it, lost it forever." Jesus loved him. Jesus did not coerce him. Jesus did not reduce the terms. He did not bargain with him. He simply invited him. Through his story in the gospel we learn the sorrow of what it is to turn away from the Lord.

I thought to myself, what if this young man would have said yes. What if he'd said yes to Christ? There's some things that would have happened. For one thing we would have known his name. Has it struck you as you read the story that he is not named? Nameless. If he'd become a disciple we would have known his name. He'd have been in the upper room. He'd been with Jesus in the room of the resurrection. He would have become one of the company that Jesus had gathered. We would have known his name. There's something very deeply symbolic to me about that. That we never really know our true identity until we come to Jesus.

I'm sure that this young man had business cards and he was known by his employees and by his fiends but the fact is we don't know his name because he didn't step in to the identity that God could have given him.

We'd know his name if he had said yes. We would see to that his life literally would have been turned inside out. His material benefits would have been given to others and that would have released the spiritual dynamic in him. He was confused about life. He thought that life was simply what you had and Jesus was saying, you've got so much more going for you than that. You've got something in you, some richness, some dynamic of personality, some being that I want to release. You come to me and I'll release it. He would have indeed had his life turned inside out.

And best perhaps of all he'd had an answer to the question that he'd asked. He would have had eternal life. Jesus would have breathed upon him. And he would have inherited the resurrection power and life of Jesus Christ.

Easter is all about real basic issues. It's about the fact that Jesus has reversed the power of death. It's about the fact that since he was risen from the dead he is the only one who has any legitimate claim to tell us about what life really is, since he is the only one to have risen from the dead. Only he knows God and since he has risen from the dead he is the only religious leader in all of human history that can take up a personal residence in your life. All the other religious leaders just left us their teaching. Jesus doesn't just leave us his teaching. He comes in. He says, since I am alive, I will live in you and I will change your life.

The bottom line is, What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus will touch your life and will tell you what to do. It will involve receiving him, believing in him and making a total commitment of your life to him. When we commit our life to him we walk with him.

When we come to Christ we have a future ahead of us and not a dismal future as this young man but a bring future.

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