

"What must I DO to inherit eternal life? That sounds like a legitimate question as people of faith want to make sure they live with God forever. But notice that the emphasis was on actions, deeds, or works. People had grown to assume that an eternal inheritance was a reward for what people did.

Many churches have a similar approach today as people are told things like, "you must tithe 10%, you must never miss worship, you must be involved in a small group, you must wear certain clothes, you must serve the poor, or you must worship a certain way." Those who do all the right stuff, assume such actions will guarantee a heavenly reward.

In Mark's narrative, Jesus listened patiently to this young man who told Jesus "ALL the bad things he had NEVER done." To which Jesus replied, "That is a wonderful start! Now sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor." He was shocked, not realizing the cost would be so great. He wanted to inherit heavenly riches, but earthly ones seemed to stand in the way. Because Jesus knew this man was obsessed with "works" Jesus set up an impossible scenario of "giving everything away."

The young man missed the point and walked away. Jesus' answer was a question, asking, "is there anything in your life that is more important to you than God's love! And the man's answer revealed that his things were more important than his God. What Jesus was really saying is "it is impossible for you to DO anything to inherit eternal life!"

If the man had stayed, Jesus would have explained the power of "grace." But his sense of an inheritance being an entitlement because of "who he was, and what he did" overshadowed Jesus' proclamation eternal life with God is an undeserved gift. In other words, Jesus' answer was "there is "nothing" you can do to "inherit" what is a gift!

Typically, people read this story as directed to "the wealthy" and feel relieved that we are "not like that young man." It is easy to assume only the upper 1% of the income pool need be disturbed by Jesus' answers, and for the "poor" this story would seem to have no relevance. the other hand, "poverty" and "wealth" are abstract ideas dependent on one's perspective. Depending on where you live, who you are, your experience and expectations, different people have different definitions of poverty or wealth.

The real question was, "*do you respond the gift of grace with servant love ONLY because that will earn you an eternal reward OR do you respond with servant love because you are so overjoyed at the undeserved grace you have been given?*"

Are you wealthy? Poor? Are you certain? I ask because "wealth" might mean more than money. "Wealth" is "an abundance" of any earthly commodity. It can mean land, stocks, homes, bank accounts, gold, artwork ... there are so many things that we assume are tied to "wealth." But people can also have an abundance of "nothing!" Like an abundance of poverty, grief, anger, resentment, or sickness. Such qualities and attitudes can overflow in the same way as an abundance of wealth.

Anything we gather and carry that fills us with a burden and is so difficult to let go of can come between us and God! I think that just as there are the "sloppy rich" there are others who enjoy and want to exploit the "emptiness" of their lives and lift it up as a badge of pride! For that reason, I think Jesus' point was simpler than we first imagine. He was saying "anything that comes between you and God must be given away, surrendered, dumped." Whether they are abundances of wealth or abundance of emptiness ... anything that can come between us, and God can come between us and God!

God says, "No other gods!" That simply means "not giving anything more value, attention, or time than God. When Jesus told this rich man to give all that he had to the poor, he knew who this man's "god" really was. If one says, "I can't quit mourning" Jesus might have said "walk away from that abundance of grief" and find someone emptier than you and dry their tears!" If one said, "I have so much anger," Jesus might say, "Get rid of it and forgive your brother so he understands the gift of grace. Jesus' ministry was based on doing for us what we can't do for ourselves. Sharing our wealth with a poor stranger is no different than giving our grief or guilt to God. Keeping God first can take on a variety of shapes, but always it is not to "inherit" but to surrender as Jesus has surrendered his love for me!

*That is what it means to be HIS disciple. To surrender what we can't escape and allow Jesus to teach what great wealth is all about. He showed the way, surrendering heaven for a manger. Fame for a cross. Life for a tomb. And then he escaped the grasp of all the earthly forces and powers and traps and rose above it all. For you and for me. He gave up all that drags us down so that his love might unburden us and lift us up, like a balloon that whose string is finally cut and is allowed to fly away.*

Is there inherent evil in wealth? NO just as poverty is not inherently good! It is all about having NO other gods. Everything on this earth is about what we do with it. What are we willing to surrender in love for God and will God be first or will it be something we want to control or cling to? What MUST I do? (Here is the secret – "nothing!") Jesus has done it all for me. Let go and learn to be at peace. And anything you touch will have a different purpose and anything that could have weighed you down, won't.

Let go of anything that gets between you and God! Once we begin there, the answer become relatively clear. The disciples got it right when they said, "If these are the rules, there is nothing anyone can do to be saved." And Jesus said, "Finally, you understand." Salvation comes from God and those who are in a relationship with God will find that life now has new choices.

The question is not "what must I DO?" but "what has God already done for me?" Am I wealthy or poor? It doesn't matter, does it? Remember what we have or don't have is only relevant in how it is shared in response to Gospel. And it becomes easy to surrender "any abundance" as we remember first what God has surrendered for us! Amen