

*“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 the emphasis was on personal actions. Too often people assume that an eternal inheritance was a reward for what people did. And despite popular opinion, inheritances can only be granted as a gift.

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 and then God’s gifts will be yours as a reward.

Jesus listened patiently to a young man who informed Jesus of all the bad things he had NEVER done. Jesus replied, “That is a wonderful start! Now sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor.” The man was shocked at such a cost, misunderstanding Jesus’ intent. He wanted to inherit heavenly riches, but earthly ones were a greater priority. Jesus seemed to know, and as this man was obsessed with actions, Jesus proposed an impossible scenario to make his point.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t imagine not having all his wealth, and walked away. Jesus’ answer was really a question: “Is there anything more important to you than God’s love?” The man’s response revealed earthly riches were more important than God’s promises. What Jesus was really saying is “it is impossible for you to DO anything to inherit eternal life! It is a gift, if you can open your arms and let go of your selfishness to receive it!”

If the man had stayed, Jesus could have explained. But his sense of an inheritance being an entitlement overshadowed Jesus’ attempt to help him understand he didn’t need do anything as the gift was already his. An inheritance is a gift, not something you can earn, purchase or deserve.

Many typically assume Jesus is attacking the wealthy and assume that lets 99% of us off the hook, for 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. But poverty and wealth are relative terms, and different people have different definitions of poverty or wealth.

The real question is *do you respond to 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 sure??? 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, or artwork or any number of things we have more of than others. But people can also have an abundance of nothing, such as an abundance of poverty, grief, anger, resentment or sickness. 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!

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 which comes between you and God must be given away, surrendered, and dumped! Whether abundances of wealth or emptiness, anything that fills you more than God's grace can be a barrier to love for God and those around us.

When God says no other gods, it isn't just about stone images. Anything, any one, any situation that has more value, attention, or time than God can push God away and become a golden calf. When Jesus told this rich man to give all he had to the poor, he did so because he knew what this man's god really was.

If he had told Jesus, "I can't quit mourning," Jesus might have said "walk away from that abundance of grief, find someone emptier than you and go dry their tears!" If had had said, "I have so much anger to my brother, " Jesus might have responded, "Give it up and hug your brother so he understands grace!"

Who can forget the Amish in Lancaster, Pennsylvania who forgave the killer of five little girls in their schoolhouse and shot himself, as they knew anger would not bring healing. Jesus' ministry was based on doing for us what we can't accomplish on our own. Sharing our wealth with a poor stranger is no different than surrendering our grief or guilt to God. Keeping God first can take on a variety of shapes, but always it is never to inherit forgiveness or heaven, but to surrender in love 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 surrendered heaven for a manger, fame for a cross, and life for a tomb. In doing so, he escaped the grasp of every earthly power and trap for you and for me! He gave up all that drags us down so his love might unburden us and lift us up, like a balloon 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? The good news is "NOTHING!" Jesus has done it all for me. Let go and learn to be at peace. In doing so anything you touch will have a different purpose. Anything that might have weighed you down, won't.

Let go of anything that gets between you and God! 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!" Hooray! You get gold stars today!

Salvation comes from God and those who are in a relationship with God will find that life now has new choices. The question is never what must I do, but what has God already done for me?" Am I wealthy or poor? Am I happy or sad? 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