

“Inheriting Eternal Life”
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 Texts: Matt. 19:13-29

Upon review of the first draft of this message, I came to several realizations. First, I had concluded the passage (Matt. 19:13-29) was about children, love and eternal life—which it is—but it is also about goodness, life itself and work. It is instructive that Jesus offers a parable about goodness immediately after the passage under consideration! Matt. 20:29 reads: **Is it not lawful** (which I take to mean compatible with the commandments of God) **for me to do what I will** (God is absolutely free to do as He wishes) **with what is my own** (meaning primarily His wealth, riches, resources **and His workers/laborers/servants/followers!**)? Are those who claim to be His, not His own? Hmm. Then Jesus asks: **Is your eye evil** (are you envious, unhappy and discontent?), **because I am good? (Acting freely, blessing whom I will as I will with what is Mine to give?)** The parable of the vineyard owner and his employees, hired throughout the working day, harkens back to the opening exchange between Jesus and the rich young ruler. **Why do you call me good? Only one, God, is good.** We have covered how this question opens up the possibility that the young man was indirectly attributing *divinity* to Jesus by his salutation. But text of Matt. 20 presses the more immediate application: in what sense might we affirm that Jesus is good and lawful. Therefore our passage is about children, love, eternal life goodness and work.

The “love” theme may require some digging into. True, Jesus loves the little children and shows love by blessing them with prayer. And, Jesus cites the commandment to **love your neighbor as yourself** explicitly. Some variants of this episode record that Jesus regarded the young man affectionately, if not with love. These seem apparent, but what is not so obvious is how love sits with **Honor your father and your mother.** To that point I would say that honoring is obeying, serving and loving all wrapped up in one. There is an honoring that is due God (such as giving Him glory and praise) that aligns with obey, serve and love as well as an honoring due our parents. It is right and proper that it should be so. It is grievous that our parents’ behavior, and our deportment, too, render this commandment difficult to perform *but the necessity of the command remains undiminished, all difficulties and challenges aside.* So, love your father and mother is synonymous with honor your parents.

There is something here too that bespeaks of delayed gratification. In performing our duty, we may forgo some earthly blessings (our service to God and parents necessarily costs us something!). **For the Kingdom of heaven is like unto a man, a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard.** The **householder** here stands for God, or more pointedly for Jesus in his relationship to the world as Lord/Master/Owner. And we are the humble **laborers** hired to work, early or late, in His vineyard/this world. Now, taking verse 15 as our point of reference—the parable is about the freedom and goodness of the householder—we are poised to learn about that goodness, through both the hiring and the paying phases of the day. Because everyone agreed to the same wage, being paid that wage at the end of the day is inherently fair. Fairness, our concern, is not the owner’s concern; His concern is expressed in his liberty to do as he wishes with his funds and his employees, us. Remember, Jesus is defining goodness as applied to himself. If we do our duty, we shall be rewarded—and the reward will be eternal life. If we do what we are

commanded to do, we are rewarded for doing it. That is generous, kind and gracious and we should do well to be entirely content, or satisfied with it! Delayed gratification is operative for conscientious workers, athletes and saints.

Last week, we explored the first four chapters of the Gospel of John through the lens of an “introduction.” We went over the major themes and the introduction of some of the key players in that gospel from a 40,000 foot view—a kind of fly-over. We kept in mind that there was in that introduction a considerable compression of time—we moved from the beginning of the gospel to the well at Sychar in a matter of weeks. We observed that Jesus worked miracles as a testimony to his divine origin and mission (that you would know **I was sent from heaven to rescue lost sinners; or to restore the human race** which had fallen from grace.) He was welcome as a miracle worker, and as a prophet; but not welcome in his true identity as the Messiah, or as the anointed one, the Christ. When he cleansed the temple he displayed his divine authority; he acted out of zeal for **my Father’s house** which claim his disciples would come to understand.

We should consider Peter’s cry (v. 27): What about us, we have **forsaken all and followed you, what shall we have therefore?** The point of discussion was: **who then can be saved?** The rich young ruler had turned away, chosen not to love Jesus which the invitation **come and follow Me** clearly entailed indicated that someone whom everyone thought had a great life, actually was spiritually dead, and was lifeless. Loving Jesus means **following Jesus**, means honoring, obeying, serving Jesus, too—forsaking all! When we choose to follow Jesus, to love Jesus, we begin to experience the life to come in our immediate setting! Our eternal life starts here and now. Jesus’ reply focuses on the life to come but the parables anchor our reward in earthly terms. Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in, and at earth and you end up with nothing. (CS Lewis, The Joyful Christian)

Today I wanted to look closely at a brief passage, Matthew 19:13-29, and observe the same shape, the well-constructed, meaningful and purposeful qualities which marked John’s introduction. The passage is unified around the theme of children, love and eternal life. The opening episode has Jesus blessing the little children, **laying his hands on them, blessing them with prayer and expressing love for them.** Children are safe in his care and that is reassuring to all parents. The children return in verse 29 as a reward, a hundredfold reward(!) For those who have chosen to love Jesus **by forsaking houses, kin and relatives for his name’s sake . . .** for this is the meaning of following Jesus, **to follow Jesus is to love him supremely; for his name’s sake.** But verse 29 closes with this: **and shall inherit eternal life.** That is what I mean by the passage being unified around children, love and eternal life. Now, between the blessing of the little children and this promise of reward for those who forsake home, family and land **to follow Jesus**, occurs the visit of the rich, young ruler.

The rich young ruler’s life, compared to that of the little children, is complex and complicated. He presents as someone who is self-assured, self-made, confident and well-off. **He is the picture of a typically idle man.** He may have been someone who lived by setting goals and achieving them—it’s not obvious. He wanted to know how to **obtain eternal life.** Further he wanted to know *what one thing he would have to do to get what he wanted—which is what I mean by typical.* **What good thing shall I do?**

Verse 17 records Jesus' arresting question: **Why do you call me good?** What do you mean by saluting me as **Good Master?** Do you mean to address me as God, for only one is good—that is God? And the idea of Jesus being a **Master**, or his Master is also up for grabs. Are you confessing so as to follow me, to submit to me as your **Master**, or **Lord**? What are you saying?

What are you saying about our relationship by how you have just addressed me?!

That aside, Jesus adds this clause, **if you want to/will to enter life, keep the commandments. *This is your work! Your employment.*** The implication of this reply is that Jesus, perceiving that the young man has not yet entered into life, he could do so, starting now, by keeping the commandments. Honoring your parents, loving your neighbor is work. Are you working at it? Are you obeying, or straying?

The young man, like many readers, misses Jesus' prompt here. He doesn't ask Jesus, "What do you mean by '**enter life**'?" What do we understand by this phrase? Or, should we ask, "How is it that I might be dead spiritually at this moment—and not know it?" But those responses would be on a deeper level than the young man chooses live on. He asks instead **which commandments?** Which commandment should I keep in order to obtain eternal life?

Jesus could have replied: "All of them; all at once . . . in spirit and by the letter." I think the reason for that would be this: **keeping the commandments is a way of life, not the performance of various separate commands one by one, or selectively.** Jesus lists prohibitions on murder, adultery, theft/coveting and false witness plus, two more, which might suggest places of particular vulnerability for the young man (as in deficiencies, or challenges?): **Honor your father and your mother** and **You shall love your neighbor as yourself?** Doing them good (through acts of service, provisions and care) may have been subpar. Social factors, like the geographic dispersion of family in pursuit of career complicates caring! Proximity helps. Happily the young ruler appears to have kept the first four commandments; but with the last two there are issues.

To honor one's father and mother is to honor, to obey, and to serve, and to love them. All four (honor, obey, serve and love) belong together, pertain; their compass is quite expansive and that quality makes it very hard to skimp, or cheat on any property. A warm affection caring for one's parents is the spirit of the commandment; therefore it is not something to be undertaken distantly, remotely, or through institutional surrogates (professionals can help but they can't replace the child's obligation).

There's no way to eliminate the messy, costly and complicated *human* nature of this commandment. Parental care can be very challenging, and often is. However, there is a reward which comes, through the goodness of God, a blessing which returns to those who obey by doing their duty! Examples of kindness, and extraordinary gentleness abound in this very human arena of family love.

That we get rewarded for doing what we ought to, are commanded to do is so marvelously generous of God!

Verse 21 follows:

20 The young man *said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” (My life is so empty, pointless and purposeless. My floor is littered with discharged syringes, and empty beer cans, or bottles. What am I living for? Who am I living for?) **21 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be [perfect] complete,** (here’s a suggestion!) **go and sell your possessions and give to *the poor*** (give philanthropy a try—forsake, bless, share your earthly ware—you cannot take it with you), **and you will have treasure in heaven** (in addition to all the blessings you bestow!); **and come, follow Me.”**

Just what is Jesus inviting this young man into here? He is inviting the young man into a love relationship. That’s what **Come. Follow me** means. It is inseparable from come, honor me . . . obey, serve and love me. Be as my child. Or, be as a child of God to me . . . part of our one family. And that, as we say, is the blessed and eternal life we are saved to inherit.

Amen.