

What Must I Do?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 9, 1988. Scripture Lesson: Genesis 3:8-19; Psalm 90:1-12; Hebrews 4:1-3, 9-13; Mark 10:17-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I wonder how many people now-a-days are concerned about eternal life. I mean, rarely do I hear this concern raised by young or old. Today people ask, "How can I be happy and successful?", "How can I achieve inner peace?", "How do I deal with failure?" The questions I usually hear have to do with *this* life. The people who ask about eternal life are rare and very special.

In the story just read from Mark's Gospel, a man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He desperately wanted to see Jesus. He was deeply concerned. Maybe he was worried about what would happen after death. But it's equally possible that he wasn't entirely happy with his present life. Eternal life doesn't just refer to life after death. It refers to a quality of life right now as well. Jesus once said, "To know God is eternal life." And he said, "Whoever hears my voice and believes in me has eternal life." So maybe the young man was really asking "How can I know God? How can I hear your voice clearly? How can I believe?" That's what eternal life is all about; knowing God, hearing his Word and believing.

And how does Jesus respond to this urgent question? Well, his response is rather curt. "Why do you call me good?" Jesus sounds a little irritated. That's not how I would've responded. I'd have said, "Thank you for the compliment and for caring enough to come." That would've been more courteous. But Jesus wasn't always polite by our standards. We have this great temptation to make Jesus into a polite, middle-class minister who tries so hard not to offend anybody. But sometimes Jesus contradicts

us. Sometimes Jesus knows that politeness and courtesy doesn't get to the root of what's bothering us.

And then in response to the man's question about eternal life, Jesus says, "You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" Now notice that Jesus mentions only five of the Ten Commandments and they aren't in the right order. And then he adds one which isn't one of the Ten but is, nevertheless, an Old Testament command, "Do not defraud." Maybe Jesus just got them wrong as most of us would if we had to repeat them in order correctly from memory. But that detail really doesn't make any difference.

The biggest problem is that in answer to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life," Jesus said to keep the commandments. Now every evangelical Christian knows that the *correct* answer is "You are saved by Grace alone, through faith in Christ alone." But we have to be honest with the text. This time Jesus said that one inherits eternal life by keeping the commandments. He's really being faithful to many verses of Scripture. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus the Lord tells his people, "You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a person shall live." And if we conclude that this is an Old Testament command which no longer has any authority over us remember that Jesus said, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

The man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "Keep the commandments." And the man immediately answered, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." There's something childlike and naive about that answer. Of course as Christians we know that "all have

sinned and fall short of the glory of God." "There is none that is righteous; no, not one," Paul says. But I don't believe there was any conscious self-righteousness in the man's answer. He was simply echoing the prayer of the Psalmist who wrote, "...if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me." He was a pious, religious, sincere Jew.

And when the rich young ruler said that, "Jesus looking upon him loved him." Here's someone any pastor would love to have as a parishioner; someone who's concerned about eternal things; who wants to know the will of God; and who has obtained wealth honestly. Someone who doesn't defraud his employees; who treats his elderly parents honorably; who's remained faithful to his wife despite so many temptations. And as a pious Jew who keeps the commandments he worships and prays and gives a tenth of his money to the work of the Lord. He is an exemplary human being.

And yet he felt that there was still something that he must do. He was troubled. Maybe he'd been reading the Jerusalem Times about famine in Ethiopia and seen one of those pictures of children with hollow cheeks, and vacant stares, and protruding bellies, dieing of starvation and he was troubled. Maybe he'd put down the paper and dreamed of the romance and adventure of going off to some strange land to serve the Lord.

There are people like this today in our churches; good people, sincere people who are active in church. They've obtained their money and possessions honestly. They love God, they keep the commandments, they confess Christ as Lord and Savior, they're honest, thoughtful, faithful men and women. And yet they're troubled. They're troubled by the fact that *they* have so much and *others* have so little and feel there's something they must do about it. At night they kneel in prayer and ask Jesus what they must do.

They probably wouldn't say that they're seeking eternal life. More likely they'd say they're simply not entirely satisfied with their lives. They'd say that their possessions don't fulfill their deepest needs and aspirations. They're looking for something more in life. They're not aware of any glaring sin in their lives. They give generously to their church and to other charitable organizations. And yet there's still something lacking, something they feel they must do, something they feel God wants them to do.

If you can identify with that kind of person, our Gospel lesson speaks to you. If we sincerely run to Christ and kneel, asking him what he wants us to do, we'd better be prepared to obey when he answers. The rich young ruler asked the question and he received the answer, but he didn't like the answer and went away. That's the last we hear of someone who might have gained a place in history as a disciple of Jesus.

But aren't we all sometimes like the rich young ruler? We ask for guidance in a certain situation and we're shown unmistakably the way we ought to go. In our innermost hearts we know quite well what we ought to do-- but we don't like to take this particular way. We turn our backs on the clear guidance we've received and go on our own way. I remember quite clearly in my first pastorate counseling a vibrant young Christian in his early twenties who wanted to serve the Lord in the Christian ministry. He'd fallen in love with a girl who, by her own admission, didn't believe that Jesus was Lord and was quite outspoken about her unbelief. He said that he'd been praying about what he should do. Should they get married with the hopes that he'd convert her? Maybe he should break up with her, but he loved her too much. As I listened to him describe his anguish I knew that he felt that the Lord was telling him to break off with the girl or he'd

never accomplish all that the Lord wanted to accomplish through him. And I remember vividly how "his countenance fell and he went away sorrowful" because he could not or would not do what he believed in his heart what the Lord told him he must do.

A lot of people complain that their prayers haven't been answered. I wonder, though, how many simply haven't acted on the answer they clearly received because they didn't like the answer. Before we complain that our prayers go unanswered, shouldn't we ask ourselves whether we haven't turned our backs on the guidance we have clearly been given by God?

"What must I do?" What do you feel God is constraining you to do? When God tells us there are things that we must do and we fail to do them we just can't be happy. I don't believe that we can *enjoy* the eternal life that the Bible says is God's will that all of us have, if we continue to do what God has told us *we must not do*; or if we continually fail to do what God has told us *we must do*.

I don't know what the Lord is telling you that you *must* do. I do believe the Lord will make it plain if you keep asking. ^{And no matter how impossible and difficult} Maybe the Lord's not telling you to go and sell all that you have. ^{that thing is for you today, if God has said you must do it, He will make it possible. For with God all things are possible.} Maybe the Lord's telling you to give just 10% of your wealth. ^{Someone says, Well that's not possible...} I know of a man working in a certain industry who came to feel that the Lord was telling him that he, as a Christian, must not be involved in that industry. He agonized over how he'd make a living if he resigned. ^{It's not possible to obey the word said.} He finally did what he believed the Lord was telling him he must do and he's never been happier. ^{He had made it possible, and the Lord has provided.} ~~The Lord has provided.~~

Is there something God is telling you that you *must* do today or tomorrow or sometime very soon? Something weighing on you, troubling you, something you're putting off. ^{Maybe you feel it's impossible for you today,} Perhaps an apology or a long overdue letter or phone call. Perhaps you need to make restitution for something

you've stolen from work or school. Perhaps there's a broken relationship you've been nursing but the Lord is saying that you must seek reconciliation. Maybe you're involved in a relationship that you know the Lord has said you must not be involved in.

Faith in Jesus always involves renunciation. It involves giving up good things for something better. And whenever God tells us we must do something it's only because God loves us and knows that we won't really experience life as he meant it for us until we learn by God's grace to obey.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you that by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ you have overcome sin and brought us to yourself, and that by the sealing of your Holy Spirit you have bound us to your service. Renew in us your servants the covenant you made with us at our Baptism and when we first believed. Send us forth in the power of that Spirit to perform the service you set before us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.