

As we continue our teaching series through the Gospel of Matthew, we read in chapter 19 about a story of a man asking about “eternal life.” Depending on your spiritual, specifically, church backgrounds, you likely have a pre-conceived notion about the phrase, eternal life. We are going to see Jesus answer the man’s inquiry in a way you wouldn’t expect. Jesus said eternal life is connected to what we do in the present. We’re connected to a story bigger than just our individual story.

For many of us, this speaks to a core question we have about meaning. Does what we do matter? There are moments of life in which meaning is clear. You help someone in need and know what it’s like to be for someone other than yourself. You attend a wedding ceremony and sense that there is something unique about the event. If you have children, you experience a transformative moment at the birth of your children.

But for many of us, we also struggle to see how our story connects to something more than just us. I remember leaving the country for the first time and watching the World News in a different country. There were countries, wars, and events happening that I never hear about. I was part of a world story, which was bigger than just my story. As a parent, you hope your parenting will lead your children to join a story bigger than just their story. Think about your career, whether you’re at the beginning of your career and want to influence and impact your organization, or if you’re at the end of your career and strive to leave a legacy, you want to know that what you do has lasting meaning.

What we’re going to see in our passage is Jesus talks about eternal life in a way that connects to our search for meaning. Namely, what we do in the present is connected to what God will do in the future.

Maybe you’re here today burdened by where you are in life. Perhaps you’re wondering if what you do matters. If that’s you, I want you to hear hope and encouragement from the words of Jesus.

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. Matthew 19:13-15

In Jesus’ day, children were considered insignificant, overlooked, and outsiders. Which makes the actions of the people who brought the children, the rebuke of the disciples, and the declaration of Jesus interesting.

The people who brought the children believed Jesus was precisely the type of person who welcomed outsiders. The disciples, perhaps desiring to protect Jesus from demands, believed Jesus had better things to do. In their mind, there was an order to things, a category to who belonged with Jesus. There were insiders and outsiders. Several years ago, I had a meeting with a well-known pastor. What I remember most was the experience of getting to his office was entering the building and being escorted through a lobby with two people watching the door, through a maze of desks, to the back of the building, into a conference room where he and another guy were waiting for me. Whatever the intention of the design, I got the clear sense I was an outsider.

That’s what makes Jesus’ statement fascinating. He removed the objections and invited the children to join him. You get the sense this is about who has access to God. Who can be part of what God is doing? Jesus removes the barriers that keep people as outsiders. The people who are insiders may be different than you think.

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

“Which ones?” he inquired.

**Jesus replied, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,” and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”
vv.16-19**

In the first verse, “Just then,” in the original Greek, has an attention-grabbing aspect. It is as if Matthew said, “And then, an interesting thing happens...” A man comes to Jesus to ask about eternal life. What does he mean, eternal life?

Eternal refers to the ages or periods of time. Jesus spoke of the present age, and the age to come (Matt. 12.32; 13.22). There is a reality now and a reality that is future. For example, if you lead a team at work, you may say to them, “Here’s how things are now,

but in six months it will look like...." To speak of eternal life is to ask, "How do I share in the age to come?"

But Jesus responds in a way you wouldn't expect. If you want to be a part of God's future, do something in the present. He tells the man to keep the commandments. The man asked which ones, which was a valid question because there are 613 commands in the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus chose five out of the Ten Commandments, and "love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, what this man does in the present age somehow connects to God's future age.

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. v.20-22

What do I still lack? Sell everything.

Jesus answers his question - but the man doesn't like Jesus' answer. There has to be some "other" thing he can do. Jesus said if you want to take the next step, sell everything. The word perfect in this verse does not mean moral flawlessness, but rather, maturity.

Why does Jesus ask the man to sell everything? Jesus didn't ask that of other people. Maybe the reason is found in Jesus' choice of commands. Jesus chose five commands from the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are structured where the first four commands are about how you relate to God, and the last six are how you relate to other people. Jesus took five commands from the group of six. Which one did He leave out? Do not covet. To covet reveals you are dissatisfied with what you've been given. Maybe by leaving it out, Jesus was drawing attention to it. It's as if He is saying, you need to deal with the thing that is stopping you from getting eternal life, namely that you are dissatisfied with present things. The man lost sight of the fact that his everyday actions were where eternal life began.

Follow me

But Jesus calls him to something new with his invitation to, "follow me." This was not an abstract spiritual language. To follow a rabbi meant you learned what he knew and did what he did. What Jesus was doing in his everyday was bringing a sense of God's future to the present. He healed the sick, redeemed the outcasts, and challenged the unjust power structures, not because they were nice things to do, but because they were part of what God's future world will be. Jesus inaugurated the age to come by doing future things now. As New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright put it, "The whole point of what Jesus was up to was that he was doing, close up, in the present, what he was promising long-term, in the future." And Jesus invited this man

to join him and see that eternal life was breaking into ordinary, everyday places. More than sacrifice, Jesus called this man to a better life. And the man responded by walking away, which is not how you would expect the story to end.

So, a man asked Jesus, "How do I get eternal life?" Jesus gave him the answer, "now" is connected to "then," "here" is where "there" begins. But the man did not like the answer; he wanted there to be some other thing. Well, if he wanted to get to the heart of it, something in him needed to change. And he could make the change now and see eternal life every day. The man said, "No."

It's easy for us to read this and not connect with the man. We can easily say something like, "If it were me, I would have sold everything." But Jesus calls each of us to new ways of thinking, relating, working, parenting, and leading every day. He speaks in direct and indirect ways, and we push off the call to change in both profound and subtle ways. We quickly lose sight that the place we've been given is the place where God's future begins. We are this young man in more ways than we realize.

Camels and Cash

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." v v.23-26

Jesus used this interaction as a teaching moment. He used a proverb that was used by the ancient rabbis: a large animal fitting in a small space. The point is to describe something difficult and rare. What is Jesus saying with this proverb? Is Jesus anti-wealth? No, Jesus was financially supported, for example, by wealthy and influential women (Luke 8). And wealthy people did say "yes" to Jesus and the kingdom of God. Zacchaeus redeemed the financial situation of many in Jericho (Luke 19), Joseph of Arimathea provided the property where Jesus was buried (Matt. 27.57), and Nicodemus gave burial elements that would have been costly (John 19.39). Wealthy people were part of the Jesus movement. So what was Jesus saying with the proverb?

There was a belief in Jesus' day that to be rich meant you had special favor with God. (Some still believe that today.) There was a belief wealth meant you were automatically on the inside, that you were first. Maybe Jesus is saying that the people who seem like they are on the inside, may be on the outside. Jesus continually challenged who God is for. People - particularly, religious people - had categories of who should be in and should be out, but Jesus (like with the children above), challenged barriers.

Jesus questioned the insiders and spent time with the outsiders. Those standing on the certainty of their good morality could miss out. Those who have got it all wrong, get an invitation. The criteria, which matters, is to follow Jesus.

This shocked the disciples. If the people who seemed like insiders may not be in, how did anyone join what God was doing? God was doing impossible things. God was renewing people and then placing them in situations to renew the world.v.27-30

Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. v v.27-30

The disciples are an example. On the one hand, Peter's comment sounded greedy, "What do we get out of following you?" But maybe there is another side to Peter's question. Perhaps he was asking, "Will what we've done matter? We've done things in the present (left behind possessions); how is that connected to the future?"

Jesus said there would be a renewal of all things (Rev. 21.5). Not a destruction of all things, but a renewal of all things. In other words, what we do now matters because it will be part of God's renewed world. But not everyone gets this. The people who follow Jesus are people who bring the future into the present.

You are renewed

This is echoed as the first followers of Jesus made sense of the sacrificial death of Jesus. Jesus died for you - not only to change your future (though that is certainly part of it), but Jesus died for you so you would start to live that future now. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." Jesus died to change how you live now. If you put your faith in Jesus, you are a recipient of the renewal of all things, and you are tasked to start the renewal in your ordinary everyday places where God has you.

Where are you placed to bring renewal? You have everyday tasks you may overlook or reduce to ordinary. What would change

about you and your world if you saw your ordinary tasks as an opportunity to bring a glimpse of God's future into the present? What you do matters because this age is the place where God's future age begins.

In his letter, 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote something unexpected and often overlooked. Chapter 15 has a lengthy description of what God's future will look like - a new life, new bodies, and a new sense of justice. At the end of 57 verses on the future, Paul wrote, "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15.58). What you do now is not in vain. For many people, God's future somehow has translated to stop doing things now. But this was not so for the Apostle Paul. What we do now matters because of God's future age. "There" begins "here."

N.T. Wright puts it this way:

"Every act of love, gratitude and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation...and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption...all of this will find it's way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make."

The God-driven, Spirit-led things that you do now will be part of God's future. It all matters. The Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, supposedly was asked what he would do if he knew Jesus would return tomorrow. He replied, "I would plant a tree." Which doesn't seem like the "holy" or "religious" thing to do - unless you believe that all of life matters. Every piece of art crafted, every work decision that you make with integrity, every act of leadership that develops people, every social justice made right, every word of hope spoken to the downcast, and every act of forgiveness that you do, brings a glimpse of God's future into the present.

This matters because when you do things that are part of God's future, you bring that future into the present. "Your work is not in vain." You bring "there" to "here." You bring hope to your family, work, people in your circle, and people outside your circle. You invite people to join the story of God.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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