

Eternal Life

Luke 18:18-30

Series: The Journey to Jerusalem (Luke, Fall 2019)

Preaching Date: January 12, 2020

Worship: Forever

Key Sentence: Eternal life is not earned by our merit, but achieved by God for us.

Outline:

I. The barrier to eternal life (Luke 18:18-25)

II. The giver of eternal life (Luke 18:26-27)

III. The blessing of eternal life (Luke 18:28-30)

Luke 18:18-30 And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²³But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. ²⁴Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

²⁸And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” ²⁹And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Eternal Life

Luke 18:18-30

So what happens when you die? Before we get to our Scripture this morning, I'd like us to explore that question for a minute. On the most basic level there are only two answers: "something" or "nothing." You can either believe that there is nothing in the nature of human beings that survives death, or that there is something, part of us that outlives us and after death experiences a new reality of some kind. And usually that something is said to be eternal. It experiences this new reality in an unending and enduring way, usually called eternal life.

Atheists, traditionally, have been in the "nothing" camp. I read a post at *The Atlantic* and found statements like: "I have always felt that when I die, I am dead and gone, my conscious life will end, my interactions with others will end, and I will be simply gone. I don't know what causes consciousness but I expect that it will end." Another says "what we [atheists] think happens when we die is that we die, only our contributions to the world we are departing will live on, and that's all there is to it. We're not going to be around to experience it." Some find comfort in this "I think when I die I'll cease to exist, and in some ways I'm happy about that. Life is hard work. I'm glad that someday life will cease, and my burdens will dissolve with my joys. I don't want to live forever."

But not even all atheists can feel this way. One says "For me, the fear of death is far and away the most immediate and challenging aspect of my atheism." Steven Weinberg, an atheist and cosmologist admits that he is "nostalgic for a world in which the heavens declared the glory of God." Poet Philip Larkin rejected belief in God while also recognizing that a life lived in the glaring light of "the sure extinction that we travel to" could be nearly unbearable at times. Playwright Eugene O'Neill seems to have thought that a life stripped of all illusions, including theological illusions, would be intolerable, plunging us into despair and madness. The post author called this catastrophic atheism.

Simply put, most people have an underlying fear of death. Most people do long for eternal life of some sort. I find it fascinating that recent surveys showing an increase in atheists and agnostics and "nones," no religion also show an increased believe in what the surveyors call "the afterlife." "I don't believe in God or religion but I believe something in me survives death." Then there are those who want to avoid death altogether, to find eternal life for this body now. I first saw this in Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction. When I was a boy I read his juvenile books, then graduated to *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Starship Troopers*.

As I got older Heinlein's writing changed too, and with the introduction of Lazarus Long as a character Heinlein began exploring what I'd call 'eternal life by technology,' or 'eternal life without religion.' These novels, especially *Time Enough for Love* depict people who'll do anything to avoid death: selective breeding, rejuvenation techniques, cloning, even time travel. At the time Heinlein was getting older and was frequently ill. You get the impression his character's fanciful ways of avoiding death were his own wishful thinking.

This morning we're looking at verses in Luke 18 in which someone comes to Jesus with a question about eternal life, and Jesus uses the opportunity of the question to show us both what does not and what does lead to eternal life. He shows that eternal life is not earned by our merit, but achieved by God for us. Now I have to say one other thing before I start, that Jesus and the people in this conversation are not talking about mere eternal life, endless existence. They are talking about a certain kind of eternal life, call it blessed eternal life, an eternal life of joy, fulfilment and purpose in the presence of God.

Let's read the whole passage, then we'll trace its development in three steps. Luke 18:18-30 *And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* ¹⁹*And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.* ²⁰*You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'* ²¹*And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth."* ²²*When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* ²³*But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.* ²⁴*Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!* ²⁵*For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."* ²⁶*Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"* ²⁷*But he said, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."* ²⁸*Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you."* ²⁹*And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,* ³⁰*who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."*

Jesus has already been talking, in Luke 18, about salvation issues. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector he emphasized that crying out to God in humility, "have mercy on me, a sinner," is the key to salvation, "this one went home justified." In the account of the little children he emphasized that coming to him like a little child, in dependence and trust, is the doorway to the kingdom of heaven.

Now he offers a counter-example, a warning. There are some things that stand in the way of salvation and eternal life. The Pharisee had, possibly hypocritically, tried to convince God he was righteous because of his detailed law-keeping. He had failed. Now comes this ruler (in Matthew he's called a rich, young man) and with apparent sincerity asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. But Jesus shows that God's standards are very high. For those who will try to inherit eternal life through doing, they are impossibly high.

Notice that like so many in every age of the world, he longed for something more, something beyond life, something eternal. Also, like so many, he had the idea he could do something to earn it or make it happen. So, Jesus picks up on the ruler's use of the word good, "good teacher." Jesus says "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." This was a common teaching in Judaism in the first century, that only God was good. Some have said that Jesus here denies his own deity. "I'm not good, only God is good." But given what the Scriptures say and what Jesus himself says elsewhere, this is not what he means. It's way more likely that he is accepting the description and affirming his own deity. "You call me good, and in doing so you call me God."

Jesus' purpose, I believe, was to raise from the very beginning of the conversation the idea that God's standards of goodness could only be met by God. Had this ruler recognized that he could not be good in himself, and had he, like the tax collector, taken a path of repentance rather than good deeds, this conversation would have gone rather differently. He would have gone home justified.

As it is Jesus seeks to draw this out of him. He says "You know the commandments. Let me remind you of them. Are you good by this standard?" Then he refers to five of the ten commandments, the five having most to do with relationships between people. He doesn't emphasize the vertical relationship, which is between you and God, but the horizontal relationship between you and others: "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother." In addition to being the commands on relationships, these are also the commands that are most external and observable. Some of the vertical commands would have to be tested more on inner attitude than external behavior: "You shall have no other Gods before me, You shall not make for yourself an idol, You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy." Those commands are concerned with the allegiance of a person to God. Giving God first place in your life is an attitude more of the heart than of external behavior. Finally the tenth commandment, "do not covet," is almost entirely inward.

But on the basis of external behavior the man sees himself as behaving righteously. “All of these I have kept from youth.” These commandments test whether he has behaved well toward his fellow man, and he says “yes, I have.” I don’t think he’s being the Pharisee here. I think he’s sincere but hasn’t yet grappled with the heart element of God’s standard. External righteousness doesn’t satisfy Jesus. If the ruler had heard the Sermon on the Mount he’d have already known this. Jesus takes the command about murder and says if you’re angry or hate, you’ve committed murder in your heart. He takes the command on adultery and says if you lust you’ve committed adultery in your heart. He ups the ante on all kinds of commands and makes all of them heart issues first.

That’s what he’s doing with his challenge to the ruler. “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” By saying “come, follow me” Jesus is asking him to obey the vertical commandments from the heart. And by asking him to give away all that he has, Jesus is demanding a heart level response to “do not covet.” It’s not just “do not covet what your neighbor has,” it is “do not hold tightly to what you have.” Finally, in promising this young ruler “treasure in heaven” Jesus is, by implication promising what he asked for, eternal life.

This demand has caused a lot of debate over the years. Some say all believers should give all their possessions to serve Jesus. Some say a select group, like monks, should embrace poverty. Many say that this demand applied only to the young man, not to anyone else. And while I agree that the details were for this specific case, I still think we need to be made uncomfortable by this demand. It asks you and me the hard question: is there anything in life that has higher priority than your relationship with Jesus? For this rich young man, the thing that stood in the way was his wealth. What might it be for us? Jesus demands a higher place than your work, a higher place than your possessions, a higher place than your comfort, a higher place even than your relationships.

Faced with this demand, don’t be shocked if you say “No, I can’t give up all that. Even as a follower of Jesus I don’t think I can live this way.” And you’re right. Anyone with human eyes, a human heart, human reasoning cannot live this way. Our possessions, our comfort, our relationships are the stuff of normal life. We want to give God first place, but we can’t. Verse 23. “But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.” It’s evident that on some level he wanted to set it all aside and follow Jesus. He also wanted the eternal life he’d been seeking. But he couldn’t, wouldn’t meet this standard. He had said “good teacher” and Jesus had said “only God is good.” Now Jesus has revealed this truth to the ruler’s own heart. He cannot meet the standard of goodness which leads to eternal life.

In a less extreme way this ruler is making the same mistake the Pharisee made in the parable. He tried to set his own standard of righteousness and then claimed he met it. The rich ruler admits that God's standard of righteousness is the right one and is sad he hasn't met it. Only the tax collector is willing to say "have mercy on me, a sinner," and he's the one who gets justified out of the deal.

Verse 24 "Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, 'How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.'" Before we discuss this verse I want to point out, as I have before, that compared to the average person in the world, and across time you are rich. We have provision and comforts, luxuries and capabilities that few people in any age have enjoyed. In the course of human existence anything more than a tentative idea of where your next meal is coming from is comparative luxury. Many of us have never missed a meal, except intentionally. In the course of history anything more than a crude one room hut is comparative luxury. We have houses with way more rooms than people. In the course of history anyone who learned to read was privileged. We have college educations. In the course of human history any news from beyond your town was an event. We have 24/7 live streaming from across the world. In the course of human history any money above survival was a luxury. We have money for all kinds of luxuries. So we must not think of these verses as applying to someone else.

Of all the barriers that might keep someone from entering the kingdom, why does Jesus single out wealth as the problem? Well, it's partially circumstantial of course. This happened to be a rich man and it was his riches that kept him from eternal life. The Pharisee in the previous story had a problem with pride and arrogance. Others in this Gospel have been lost through fear or jealousy, duty or self-indulgence. Everyone has a problem. No one meets God's standard. In that sense this riches are just an example. But didn't I just say we're all rich? So, when Jesus points this particular barrier out to us, we need to take it seriously. Another question: why is it hard for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God? I believe it's simply because it's easier to rely on wealth than it is on God. Our wealth gives us security. Our wealth makes life easy, in some ways, apart from God. Our wealth dulls us to our essential neediness, brokenness and sin. Wealth is morphine to the soul.

Yet, as I cannot stop pointing out, there are some teachers and preachers among us who would say "Well clearly the rich man is more likely to enter the kingdom, because God blesses with material prosperity those who have faith in him." That was sort of the same attitude that these Jewish listeners probably had.

The teaching of the Pharisees and religious leaders was that God gives material prosperity to those who please him. Jesus wants to puncture that attitude: “No. It's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” Some of you may have heard things like the eye of the needle was a small gate into Jerusalem, so it was difficult to get a camel through it, or some other cultural, plausible explanation. No. It's obvious Jesus was intentionally making an outlandish analogy. It needed to be impossible. How could you put a camel through the eye of a needle? You couldn't, and that's the point. The kingdom of heaven, used again here as a stand-in for the eternal life of the original question, is impossible for a person to enter by his or her own righteousness. Wealth or pride or pleasure or security will inevitably and without exception trip us up. We will fall short of God's standard. We can no more gain eternal life by our own righteousness than we can reverse the aging process and back up into our mother's wombs.

So the visit of this rich young man has allowed Jesus to present the paradox of eternal life, to present again the paradox of righteousness, the paradox of the kingdom. God's standard of righteousness and of entry to the kingdom is impossibly high. No one can meet it. And this leads the disciples to a key question. Verses 26 and 27 “Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’”²⁷ But he said, ‘What is impossible with man is possible with God.’” The disciples recognize that this discussion is about who can be saved. The kingdom of heaven, eternal life and salvation are used almost interchangeably in these passages and represent three different aspects of God's good plan for those who have no righteousness of their own. Because “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” God has found a solution to this dilemma. On the one hand he loves us and cares for us. On the other hand his inescapable standard of righteousness, goodness and allegiance, is too high for us to meet.

But God, for whom nothing is impossible, has made a way. Through the power of his Holy Spirit at work in us, he can declare us righteous, as we saw in the parable of the good Samaritan, save us from our sin and give us eternal life. Moreover, it is by the power of God at work in us that we can follow him. Riches will not then constrain us. Pleasures and pride will not forbid us. Fear and failure will not hold us back. God has made a way, and God can do the impossible. In the last few verses we see the blessing of eternal life as God's gift to those in whom he has worked these impossibilities.

Verse 28 And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” The rich young ruler could not leave all to follow Jesus, but the disciples did, and not through any merit of their own. I believe that Peter says this almost in amazement. “We did this. How were we able to do this?”

The disciples, and millions of others through the centuries, were able to do it solely through the grace of God. These people had not waited for perfection. They knew they didn't have in themselves some kind of righteousness that made them worthy to follow. No, it was the grace of God which enabled them to turn to him. It was the work of God in their hearts which enabled them to trust him. Then and only then did they leave all to follow him.

This was what he asked the rich young man to do: Go and sell all that you have, and give it to the poor, and come and follow me - put your trust and dependence on me, not on your riches. This is also what he asks us to do when we become as little children, to be completely dependent, as little children are, on the care of their parents. What Jesus wants is our complete and total trust in him. With man salvation is impossible, but with God it is possible, so trust in God. In fact, it may be his desire that we trust in him that keeps him from spelling out how God's provision works. He just wants our simple trust. He doesn't require doctrinal sophistication. He just wants us to turn to him, and we will be saved.

But Scripture does tell us that the way God has made this provision is through the death of his Son. He died in our place to resolve the apparent tension between God's love and his righteousness. The death of Jesus Christ was the ultimate act of love by God, it showed like nothing else could, how much he cared for us. Romans 5:8 "God demonstrates his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This is love, that God the Son died as a substitute for us. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross. We deserved to die. He chose to die. We don't have to die. An illustration I used a lot many years ago is of a cancer patient. Here you are, dying of cancer, it's spread through your whole body, inoperable, can't be treated. Someone walks to your bedside and says: I can and will take every cancer cell out of your body, and put it in my own, so that I will die, and you will live. That's what Christ has done. He has taken the cancer of our sin and died the death we were due. This death is the ultimate expression of God's love for us. It is also the ultimate expression of his righteousness. Because the sin that deserved punishment was punished. God did not close his eyes to our unrighteousness He did not lower his standard one iota. He punished sin fully and completely. His wrath was satisfied, payment was made, in the person of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Impossible for man. Possible but possibly unbelievable in God. I've been listening to music by a new artist named Jess Ray. One of her great lines is "it may be too good to be understood, but it's not too good to be true." With man this is impossible. The standard of eternal life is impossible. No one can meet it. But God met it in Jesus. We receive eternal life and all good blessings as a result.

Verse 29: “And he said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.’” This leaving home, leaving wife, leaving brothers, leaving parents, leaving children is Jesus’ generalization of what he said to the rich young ruler. Don't give anything else first place, don't depend on anything else, put your allegiance and dependence and trust on me. And God will bless you: your spiritual reward will be great in this age: fellowship with God, the comfort of his Holy Spirit, His peace in perplexity, his help in adversity, His strength in temptation, his forgiveness in sin. Great blessings in this age, but even more in the age to come: eternal life. Remember the rich young man's question: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus circles the discussion back to that original question and gives his ultimate answer: trust in me alone, and God will bless you both now and with eternal life.

So the answer to our original question is clear. What happens after you die? New life and eternal life. In fact, though, Scripture teaches that eternal life after death comes in two phases. Paul says in 2nd Corinthians that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. A believer is never separated from God, not even by a so-called sleep of death, but steps into the presence of the Lord. But, then, later on, the believer’s body will be resurrected and glorified and we will be with the Lord forever in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

This promise has long been exceedingly precious to me. As I’ve said before, if I have a favorite verse of Scripture it is Revelation 21:3-4. I don’t know when this verse became so important to me, but I think it was when I was in seminary, or maybe shortly after as we were starting Trinity. I began to live more closely in the fear and mourning and pain of the people around me and I began to long not just for eternity, but for that blessed eternity. In that process I was pierced by these words which sum up God’s big idea through all of Scripture and his heart for humankind. Revelation 21:3-4 “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

There is an eternal life that we have longed for, though we may not know it, though we may deny it. And we do not and cannot reach it by merit, but only by the impossible grace of a God who wipes away every tear through his Son.