

" What Must I Do?"
(Mark 10:17-31)
October 10, 2021

"We come not to be entertained, not to be needlessly humored, nor to remain the same." If we take the above words we said in "Call to Worship" seriously and declare them as what we desire, we shall not return empty-handed like the rich man who ran up and knelt before Jesus. Why would the man approach Jesus in such a rush? He must have heard that Jesus was back in town but had already made plans to leave again. He had a burning question. He took that with him and brought it in front of Jesus. By the way, why didn't Jesus' disciples stop him just like what they did to the people who brought little children to Jesus? It must have something to do with the way he dressed. He didn't dress like a peasant, but like a noble person. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Good Teacher." Who would refuse when people called this way? Jesus must have impressed this man before, either through his teachings or his miracles, or both. "Good" has a significant implication on a person's morality, religiosity, righteousness, and relation to God. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked. He was concerned about his life, not the one he was experiencing, but that lay ahead in the future. He thought Jesus could give him a guarantee, an assurance that he could claim eternal life as an entitlement.

This rich man was not the only one interested in eternal life. I think most of us showed the same interest before. What impression did we get when we first encountered the term "eternal life"? Has its meaning and significance changed in our lifetimes? Did it mean "the resurrection of the body, life after death" at some point? Or a joyful life one can enjoy in the present (John 5:24), without the fear of

death and God's judgment? If we have the chance to run to Jesus and ask him a question, do you think we would ask the same question as this gentleman did? "Eternal" life. Gee, it's hard to imagine one would look for eternity if life is just a series of unfortunate events. Therefore, eternity must mean something different, not just an extension of the imperfect worldly experiences, but its perfection.

Let's come back to the man who came to Jesus. The first response Jesus made was to ask him to stop. "Why do you call me good?" Jesus wanted him to know that the question he asked must turn to God since all who helped along the way were like fingerposts only. Jesus liked him very much when this man confidently stated that he kept all the commandments Jesus named his whole life. He kept all the rules, including what Jesus said, "Do not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, defraud, and honor one's parents." He declared that he caused no harm to anyone, and he did very well within his family.

So he was an all-around person. No wonder Jesus liked him. However, there's a catch. When Jesus said, "Do not murder," it had a more profound implication. For Jesus, "murder" is equivalent to being angry with a brother or sister, carelessly calling a brother "idiot!" or thoughtlessly yelling "stupid!" at a sister. (Matt 5:21-22) Jesus set a very high standard for people who wanted to be in the kingdom of God. They must know how to treat each other appropriately. The rich man must have thought he met Jesus' standard. However, Jesus said, "You lack one thing." It's not a criticism. Instead, Jesus must be smiling at him when he said that. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's always the same misunderstanding: one must "do" something to get something. Does this business rule apply in faith as well?

This man was rich. He possessed a lot and must know a lot how to manage them. It's natural in the business world that you pay for what you want. If it's not money, it might be a favor. It just fits that one should "do" something to get something. This time, he wanted to have the right to inherit something, namely, eternal life. He probably enjoyed his life pretty well in the present, and he believed that Jesus must know the way how to make it secure in the future. He tried to ascertain that his enjoyment would last forever. However, what Jesus told him was surprising. Instead of "doing" something, Jesus suggested "undoing." "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor." Eternal life is a gift directly from God. It's not like a business transaction that requires appropriation.

The eternal life can't be earned. It's a joyful experience in the present that Jesus wanted to bring to everyone. The only way this rich man could have that was not to do something, just like what he did with his possessions, but walk with Jesus, freely.

It's Story time.

Once a disciple asked the master, "How shall I attain Eternal Life?"

The master answered, "Eternal Life is here and now. Just come and live into the present."

The disciple was puzzled. He said, "I am in the present. Ain't I?"

The master said, "No."

"Why not?"

"Because you haven't let go of your past."

"Why should I do that? Not all of it is bad."

The master said, "The past you have to let go not because if it is good or bad, but because it is in the past."

We'll miss the point if we think Jesus was simply asking the rich man to give up his riches. Since he asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life, Jesus let him know,

the only way was to let go of his life in the past. The rich man was probably well protected, with a suitable educational environment and an excellent team to manage his possessions. He might not even need to be jealous of others since he had more than he wanted. Like many, the need was minimal to consider murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witnesses, and defraud. Maybe he had good parents too, so it was not difficult for him to honor his parents. But what about the majority? Those who didn't grow up in an environment like his, who didn't possess even the minimum for existence. There are different kinds of parents. Not all of them are good. What if honoring the parents wasn't even possible?

Living in the present is what one must do if one wants to have eternal life. As mentioned before, eternal life is to live without the fear of death and God's judgment, like holding hands with God, worshipping, and serving simultaneously. That's the reason why Jesus saw the greatest commandment as loving God and the neighbors. (Mark 12:28-31) The point is not to let go of the riches but the hindrance to living in a new order.

Do you think Peter understood what Jesus was talking about? If he understood, Jesus wouldn't say those who had left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for his sake will receive a hundredfold, but with persecutions. When the new order emerges, it shall offend the old. There shall be conflicts between the two. Could it be done then? Would it happen? Jesus assured that "for God all things are possible." That's why it's a gift, that's why we don't need to do extra. Embrace the past, let it remain in the past, so we can live in the present. Only then, we shall have a glimpse of eternity even at the most unfavorable time, like Job in his suffering, like us during the pandemics. Amen.