
What must I do to inherit eternal life? (Part 1)

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17-31) What must I do to find life in the Age to Come was a popular question in the first century. We can see from this story, Jesus recognised that this man had a heart for God, but it just had to be redirected.

Jesus gave the standard Rabbinic answer of obedience to Torah and especially the 10 commandments. But there was more. As we all know [there is nothing we can do in the sense of earning or working for eternal life](#). Jesus challenged the man and challenges us to look at our priorities in life and to get them right.

Isaac embodied the promises to Abraham, so when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, He was effectively asking him to give up on the promises. “If there is nothing in it for you, Abraham, will you still love me and want a relationship with me?”

Jesus asked the man to sell all he had and follow him. Why?? Jesus said: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John 17:3) Jesus invited the man to become one of his disciples and get to know him. [Jesus wants relationship, God wants relationship](#). The entire story of the Bible is that of God’s attempt to re-establish that relationship with His creation that He had in Eden as He would eventually again live with them. (Revelation 21:3)

Job lost everything and was never told why but through it all he learned the lesson of Abraham and this man. “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42:5)

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.
(Habakkuk 3:17-18)

If there is nothing in it for us, will we still love and serve God? Will we rejoice in the God of our salvation? Does our love of God go beyond fear of punishment or hope of reward? [On what is our relationship with our father based?](#)

Luke tells us of another man who also asked Jesus the same question, but the response followed a totally different route. On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25-37) Again Jesus elicited the standard rabbinic response but this man wanted to justify himself and so asked “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus then told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

[I suspect that we misunderstand this parable and the responses of the priest and Levite](#). Both of these Jews knew their responsibility under the Law to help the beaten man, but then they were on their way to work and would not be able to fulfil their duties if they touched the man – maybe he was dead and that would mean a long ritual of cleansing before they could go back to work. Given the state of the men it was hard to tell if he was a Jew or a gentile, in which case they were not bound to help. Such a dilemma!! I suspect that both the priest and Levite just threw their hands up in the air as they found the whole ordeal just too hard to navigate.

On the other hand, the Samaritan was not bound by the same rules and was free to show the compassion necessary to assist the beaten man. In like manner Jesus was not consumed with rule-bound theology and was also able to touch the lepers and the unclean women etc – to show the compassion of His Father to His children in their time of need.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus makes the point that **it is not what we know, but how we put that knowledge into action that is important**. What we do to the least of our brethren and sisters we do to Jesus. James makes the point that it is faith in action, not faith in knowledge that is important. Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

Paul expresses it very well when he writes “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love”. (Galatians 5:6)



Jesus raised the bar when he changed the golden rule to the platinum rule. No longer are we commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves, but we are commanded to love each other as Jesus has loved us (John 15:12).

The self-giving love of Jesus must be the model for our lives. God is love. (I

John 4:8) He does not just DO love as one of His many characteristics, but everything He is and does is motivated by love for His creation. God’s love undergirds the entire Gospel. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son.” (John 3:16) The life of Jesus is what God’s love looks like when it really goes into action. So, we too have to be completely motivated by love for God, Jesus and our fellow man. Jesus said that the distinguishing mark of his followers is that they love one another because that love reflects the nature of God. We are being challenged into a whole new way of thinking.

Sin management is not our problem, **it is lack of self-giving love**. In the beginning God created humans in His image. The ultimate plan for creation is to be again transformed to the image of God. (Colossians 3:10) Through sin we miss the mark of being that image – our vocation as a royal priesthood, reflecting the image of God to the world and the praises of the world back to God.

When we are transformed to the image of God then we embrace true love. That is why Paul can write that the greatest of all is love as it is the fulfilment of both hope and faith. **Love is not just a command, but it is our vocation**.

We are born again to a living hope in God’s love (I Peter 1:3-12) so therefore love one another earnestly from the heart (I Peter 1:22). Love each other not just with words but with actions and in truth (I John 3:18) **For whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him** (I John 4:16).

We are told that love covers a multitude of sins (I Peter 4:8). May we elevate the virtue above the vice and fill the house that Jesus has cleansed [with self-giving love and the Spirit](#) and in so doing be transformed to the image of our Father from glory to glory.

Helen Smallwood
