

What must I do to inherit eternal life? A good question; a question we all want answered. A question that many think they know the answer to. In fact, many are absolutely certain that they have the answer.

But many others have serious doubts about both the answer and most especially that absolute certainty. So, perhaps this is a question that Christians should spend some time thinking and talking about: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

The writer of Luke's Gospel thought so. The author of the Gospel of Luke thought this question about eternal life was important enough to bring up two different times in his gospel account. Two different times in Luke's gospel the question is put to Jesus: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

And surprisingly... surprisingly... in Luke's gospel Jesus gives two answers — two very different answers to this *exceedingly* important question.

The first time, the first time — the question is posed by a lawyer. And instead of giving a direct answer Jesus asks the lawyer what is written in the law.

And the lawyer gives the answer:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus tells the lawyer that this is the right answer.

Of course, as we know, following this affirmation by Jesus, they begin a discussion about who is your neighbor. And Jesus tells the

story of the Good Samaritan which we all know so well.

But that story of the Good Samaritan isn't what we will focus on this morning. The point to be made right now and what we should understand is that Jesus confirmed that the correct answer to the question of how to inherit eternal life is just what the lawyer said: ... Love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Clear enough. The lawyer understood that. We all understand that ... case closed ... we can all go home. Right?

Noooo, not right. And case not closed. Not right because ... because ... eight chapters later, in the very same gospel, another person asks Jesus the very same question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

This time the one asking is described as a certain ruler. And so this man too asks the perennial question. He asks the same question the lawyer asked: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

Jesus replies: *You know the commandments:*

'You shall not commit adultery;

You shall not murder;

You shall not steal;

You shall not bear false witness;

Honor your father and mother.

The ruler, like the lawyer, probably went to Sunday School and Synagogue regularly, and so he says that he has kept these commandments since his youth. What Scripture tells us and what matters is the further answer Jesus gives the man. Jesus tells him:

There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me.

Now that is a very different answer from the one Jesus gave the lawyer. There are a number of similarities in the two answers but we have to face the fact that selling everything, giving the money to the poor and following Jesus is very different from loving your neighbor as yourself.

Sooo, we have to conclude that Jesus gave two different answers to the same question.

If that is so, then which is right? How *do* we inherit eternal life? Is the answer different for lawyers than it is for rulers? And if so, what about the rest of us? We have to conclude that Jesus did give two different answers to the same question. So which is right and what is Jesus telling us?

If we step back from the narrative and the specific answers given and look for underlying principles we will find what could be called a Theology of Subtraction. A Theology of Subtraction.

Let's think about that for a moment. You see, we tend to think in terms of addition; we function, at least most of us function, with a Theology of Addition. As did the lawyer and the ruler. They both knew the commandments and tried to keep them. What they each had was good, perhaps even very good. But obviously it wasn't quite good enough, it didn't satisfy ... something, some little something seemed to be missing. And deep down in the marrow of their bones they both knew it. They knew they lacked something. And so they asked their question: What must I do to inherit eternal

life? What must I *add* to my already good life to make it perfect?
What must I add?

And Jesus said - and this is key - Jesus said that you don't *add* anything. You *subtract* something.

If you want to inherit eternal life, if you want to achieve perfection, you don't have to add anything to your life. Instead, you just get rid of some of the junk you have already added.

This is a Theology of Subtraction. It is a spirituality of simplification. It acknowledges that God created us each perfect individuals, complete and lacking in no good thing. We were created perfect. But we have, over the years, added a lot of junk to our lives — material, emotional, intellectual and psychological stuff that we need to get rid of.

Consider for a moment the great Michelangelo who created some of the greatest sculptures in history, not by adding anything to the stone, but rather by hammering and chiseling away great chunks of it.

Or the sculptor Gutzon Borglum who created the four presidential heads on Mount Rushmore — not by adding to the mountain cliffs but by drilling, honeycombing, dynamiting and blasting stone away to reveal them.

And did you ever notice that the ten commandments are mostly “thou shalt nots,” that is what *not* to do?

This is the Theology of Subtraction which is at the core of Jesus' teaching as well as at the root of Scripture. It involves far more than

just being generous with the money you give away or even getting rid of all those material objects you have acquired and don't know what to do with anymore.

The Theology of Subtraction means giving up ideas, opinions, judgements, illusions, images, fears and false beliefs that tie us in knots and keep us from being free. It means jettisoning all that separates us from God.

Think for a moment about that feeling we have when we pack a few essentials, turn the key in the lock on our home's door and set out on vacation. We leave behind everything and enjoy the freedom of emancipation from all that occupies our attention most of the time. And the longer we are away the more refreshed we feel. This is a small taste of what eternal life is like.

Another way to view it is to consider that we are like balloons, those great big, brightly colored balloons with the gondolas hanging from them. Balloons that classify as lighter-than-air aircraft.

That's what we are - lighter-than-air aircraft. And we know how these things work. You weight the balloon down with sandbags so it won't drift away while you fill it with hot air or helium or some other gas which is lighter than air. Then when you are ready to take off and fly, you drop the sandbags and float upward. And the more sandbags you drop the higher and faster you go.

And so here is another key point. You must drop the sandbags in order to fly. You see the balloon wants to fly, it is ready to fly, it was designed and created to fly. But first you have to drop the sandbags.

So what are *our* sandbags? What are the practices, illusions, habits, notions, fears, beliefs, and ideas which we have aggregated around us and which hold us earthbound? What are the sandbags we need to throw overboard so *we* can fly?

Certainly as Christians we want to throw out what the church has classically called the seven deadly sins: anger, gluttony, envy, sloth, pride, lust and covetousness - we certainly want to get rid of those.

And as Christians we want to rid our lives of those things we are warned about in the New Testament - in places such as the third chapter of Colossians which says:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you; fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry ... put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander and foul talk. Do not lie...

Absolutely! As Christians we want to toss out all that stuff.

And if we're honest we have to admit that we may cling to more subtle and less obvious ideas that weight us down:

- > The idea that we have to be strong and in control just to keep from being harmed or controlled by others.
- > The self image of ourselves as always being right and in a position to judge everything and everyone.
- > Or perhaps at the opposite extreme, the idea that we are unimportant and that we don't matter.
- > Or the notion that we are so different and so unique and so special that we stand back away from and apart from what is going on in the community.

And there are fears which also bind us:

- > The fear of pain and deprivation which drives us to want and think we need more than we do.
- > The fear of being unable to survive on our own.
- > Fear of being unwanted, unworthy of being loved.
- > Belief that we are only as valuable as other people's opinions make us feel.
- > And that haunting belief that we have no clear identity, no enduring sense of self.

This only scratches the surface - but we all know that there is a lot we need to get rid of.

And, we are all different. We are unique, one-of-a kind human beings each with a different mix of sandbags which hold us earthbound - each with a unique mix of weights which we need to toss overboard in order to fly.

And, our problem is not in determining what these are. The Holy Spirit is pretty efficient at letting us know what we need to subtract from our lives. We just need to listen and pay attention that voice.

Our problem, your problem and my problem, is working up the courage to toss these weights overboard. We all know deep down in the marrow of our bones what it is that we cling to and what it is that weights us down.

We just need to screw up the courage to toss it overboard and to follow Jesus' Theology of Subtraction. Then, and only then, can we fly toward eternal life.