“How to Inherit Eternal Life”
Luke 10:25-37

Just a little over nine years ago, in August of 2004, the Vietnamese community of Westminster, California, celebrated one of the kindest and bravest acts performed for them by a stranger. In November of 1985, ninety-six Vietnamese refugees despaired for their lives when the engine of the boat carrying them across the South China Sea went dead. The people crammed onto the rickety boat could see a tropical storm headed their way. For four days they had watched the ships pass: 50 of them, but none would stop to rescue them.

So when the 51st ship passed, the refugees waved, screamed, and clamored in vain. The South Korean fishing ship traveled on - but turned around 10 minutes later to save them. On board the ship, Captain Jeon, employed by Koryo Wonyang Corporation for 16 years, was returning from the Indian Ocean with 25 sailors and more than 350 tons of tuna.

As Jeon’s ship approached them, the captain could see the dire straits the people were in. He called the sailors together because it was against company policy to pick up boat people, but Jeon told them he’d take responsibility. The sailors told Jeon they were with him.

Only years later did the refugees learn what happened to Jeon. The shipping company fired him for picking up the boat people against the company’s rules. He couldn’t find another captain’s job. He survived by his savings and by helping out friends with their businesses.

In August of 2004, nineteen years after the dramatic boat rescue, hundreds of people in the Vietnamese community of Westminster acknowledged a debt they can never repay. They honored the ship’s captain, Jeon, after survivor Peter Nguyen managed to track him down. Nguyen said, “He has the biggest heart. Without his rescue, there would be no today. We would have been dead.”

Jeon, who was 62 at the time, shrugged off the compliments, saying, "If I wasn’t there, other people might have done the same thing that I did. As a fisherman for 25 years, I’ve caught a lot of fish. And during the 25 years, it was by God’s grace that we found the boat people and were able to save all of them."

Why did Captain Jeon do what he did, even though he knew it could cost him everything he had? Because it was the right thing to do, and has he said, it was the grace of God that led him to the boat people and to affect their rescue.
Captain Jeon’s experience has some similarities with an account in Scripture. Maybe you already know what it is. It is found in Luke’s Gospel, chapter ten and beginning at verse 25. It is a story that is so familiar that one of the main characters has become an adjective in the English language. Yes, I’m talking about the Good Samaritan. Captain Jeon was a Good Samaritan.

As I meditated on this familiar portion of Scripture, I asked myself, “What is the point of this story Jesus told?” And I wrestled with this for quite some time because the story is so familiar. Is it about compassion? Yes. Is it about overcoming racial prejudice? Yes. Is it a warning about self-righteousness? Yes. All these things are here, but none of these seem to be the main point. They are varying facets of the main point.

Let’s remember this story is situated in Luke’s Gospel in a particular context. This is often ignored when this story is told. It is isolated as though it stands by itself. But one of the first principles of biblical interpretation is to consider the context in which it is given. I believe what Jesus wants us to glean from this text is – an understanding of how to inherit eternal life.

Consider that just prior to this teaching Jesus had said, “I thank you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth that you have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to babes...” Then He turned to the Twelve and said, “...many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them.” That sets the stage for the events of our text.

Listen carefully as I read this familiar text and see if you can hear Jesus trying to help the lawyer, and the crowd, understand how to inherit eternal life. I’m reading Luke 10:25 to 37.

In this portion of the biblical record Jesus teaches us important REQUIREMENTS necessary to inherit eternal life.

The First REQUIREMENT (to inherit eternal life) is,

**Know the Law**

The man who is addressing Jesus is a lawyer; not a lawyer in the sense we use the term today, but a man who studied the Mosaic Law. He was an expert in the minutia of the Jewish religious code of the time. He was possibly a member of the Sanhedrin. And we will see as this interaction unfolds that, while he knew the letter of the law, he didn’t understand the spirit of it.
He came to Jesus to test him. Some scholars say his motives were evil; others aren’t so sure. But what they agree on, and so can we as we read this entire account, is that this man was really not interested in the truth. In his mind, he already possessed eternal life. He was part of the religious elite of his day. He wanted to get Jesus to say something that would incriminate Him, either in the eyes of the Sanhedrin or the Roman government. But, like many people today, he had a mistaken idea about how to possess eternal life.

His question to Jesus was; “By doing what shall I inherit, or possess, eternal life?” That is the literal rendering of his question and puts the emphasis on “doing”. This was his first misunderstanding. He assumed eternal life could be acquired by doing something. This was a common assumption of the day. But it was an assumption that Jesus came to challenge and change. Eternal life is not gained by doing - but doing is an expression of having eternal life!

Notice that Jesus does not rebuke the lawyer for his question. He knows who this man is and his knowledge of the Law. So He asks him what the Law says and for his interpretation of it.

The lawyer responds with a summary of the law; “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” This was a great answer. Jesus used this same basic summary of the Law in Mark 12:28-34. In that text He said there is no other commandment greater than these;” and he was speaking to – you guessed it, a lawyer! And in Matthew 22:40 He said, “On these two commands depend all the Law and the Prophets

You’ll notice from the text that Jesus commended him for the answer he gave. “You have answered correctly, as far as the words go; do this and you shall live.” That’s not hard to understand is it? “Do this, and you’ll have the eternal life you’re talking about.” Now, if we’re not careful, we can miss the impact of Jesus’ answer. What Jesus was really saying to him was “keep on doing this (forever) and you shall live.” In other words, the only way to inherit eternal life by keeping the law is to keep on keeping it - perfectly.

As A.T. Robertson states, “There was only one problem with the lawyer’s answer. No one ever did or ever can “do” perfectly what the law lays down towards God and man. To slip once is to fail.” James 2:10 tells us that “Whoever keeps the whole law, yet offends in one point, he is guilty of all.” There was only one man who ever kept the law perfectly; his name is Jesus.

Now before we go farther in the text, let’s pause to reflect on this requirement of knowing the Law. Why is it important to know the Law? There are a couple of reasons. First,
without the Law there is no knowledge of sin! If there is no standard of right and wrong, you can never be wrong; anything goes. No one can call you to account for your actions. In that environment God is irrelevant. So the Law introduces an objective standard for evaluating behavior, and that law comes from God Himself; it reflects His character. As those created by Him and in His image we are accountable to Him for what we do with that law.

Another reason for knowing the Law is – to understand the impossibility of keeping it. Read the books of Exodus and Leviticus. See for yourself how impossible it was to keep all the requirements. The law set a standard impossible to keep solely by willpower. That’s why God provided animal sacrifices for atonement. But many people, like this lawyer, claimed to have eternal life by their observance of the law. Paul says in Romans 3:20: “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

It is obvious that the lawyer in our text knew the words of the written Law; he could argue the smallest of details. But his knowledge was all in his head, in his intellect; it had not touched his heart. That fact sets the stage for the next requirement.

The Next REQUIREMENT (to inherit eternal life) is,

**Obey the Law**

Some of you are thinking right now “Did I hear him correctly; obey the law to inherit eternal life?” Some of you may be reaching to turn off the radio. All I ask is “Don’t jump to conclusions before you hear me out.” As Nicodemus asked, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” After you hear me out, you can send your comments and questions to me. Or contact me and ask for a transcript.

In verse 29 it becomes clear that the lawyer understood exactly what Jesus meant. He realized that he had asked a question that he already knew the answer to. In his embarrassment he asks another question to show that he did have some point at first. Our text says he asked this question in order to justify himself, that is, he was determined to prove to Jesus that he was indeed a righteous man. “Who is my neighbor?” is the question he asked.

Scholars confirm that the Jews of that time split hairs over this question and excluded from their definition Gentiles and especially Samaritans. (Now you know the reason for Jesus’ choice of characters for His narrative.) So here was the lawyer’s loop-hole. A neighbor is one who lives nearby, but the Jews made racial exceptions - as many still do today. So then, if this
lawyer could pick and choose the definition of neighbor, he could fulfill this requirement of the law. He could be pronounced righteous in the eyes of his peers.

Jesus’ response is interesting. He could have recited numerous portions of Scripture that would’ve been familiar to this lawyer. Like Leviticus 19:33; “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them.” Or Deuteronomy 10:18 and 19; “God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Or Exodus 23:4; “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him.”

But Jesus didn’t quote those verses. Instead, he painted a word-picture that led to an inescapable conclusion. I believe Jesus was answering two questions. In the process of answering the question, “Who is my neighbor?” He was also answering the question about how to inherit eternal life. While that suggestion may seem preposterous to you, again, I only ask you to hear me out.

Jesus tells of a certain man, most likely Jewish, traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. That steep, winding road was known to be hazardous, especially to those traveling alone. As he was walking along the way this man was suddenly surrounded and attacked by thieves. They stripped off his clothing, beat him senseless, and left him lying alongside the road. Not content with whatever money he had on him, they also stole his clothing! Talk about adding insult to injury.

So here this man lies by the side of the road, naked or nearly so, and perhaps unconscious. By coincidence, a certain priest was also coming down the same highway. Since Jericho was known as a city of priests, it’s likely this man was returning from his temple service in Jerusalem. By service, I mean his duties in the Temple for a period of time with the other priests of his course. You can read an example of this in Luke chapter one with Zacharias.

As the priest travels along the road he saw the wounded man lying there. What does he do? He immediately crosses over to the other side of the road. Why did he do that? Perhaps he was concerned about becoming ceremonially unclean.

We can only speculate what was going on in the mind of this priest. What we know for sure was the purpose of his office was to represent people to God. He was an intermediary; one who administered the holy things of God. He took the people’s offerings and sacrifices and presented them to the Lord. Because he served in this capacity he was make sure he was holy
himself. So he most likely didn’t want to take the chance of becoming defiled. But since he had most likely just fulfilled his annual service, he would have had plenty of time for purification.

After he’s gone, here comes another man, a Levite. He too, is most likely returning from Jerusalem. The Levites were helpers of the priests. During this time period they were Temple officials, judges, gatekeepers, and musicians. They also served as teachers and administrators of the law. So they had to know what the law said and how to keep the law themselves.

As he comes down the road, he sees the wounded man lying there. He stops, crosses the road, and looks down at the man. Then, like the priest, he crosses back to the other side of the road and continues on his journey.

Now both of these men in their own view, and in the view of others, were righteous. Their lives revolved around the keeping of the law and teaching it to others. They knew what it said. But, it seems they chose which parts of the law they wanted to obey. Earlier, I referenced Exodus 23:4, Leviticus 19:33, and Deuteronomy 10:18 and 19 as just a few examples of a proper response to those in need. These religious men violated those commands by their lack of concern for their injured countryman.

Then Jesus introduces a third traveler; a certain Samaritan. In the Jewish mind of that day, this man was almost sub-human; a member of that mongrel race and religion. According to the practices of the law, a Samaritan would never qualify as a neighbor. Why not?

After the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC, the conquering invaders imported Gentile colonists “from Babylon and other regions to resettle the land. The foreigners brought with them their pagan idols, which the remaining Jews began to worship alongside the God of Israel. The Jewish remnant also intermarried with the pagan immigrants.

In 586 BC Judah (the southern kingdom) was destroyed by the Babylonians and carried into captivity. After a forced exile of 70 years, a remnant of 43,000 was permitted to return and rebuild Jerusalem. The people who now inhabited the former northern kingdom—the Samaritans—vigorously opposed this repatriation and tried to undermine the attempt to reestablish the nation. You can read about that in the book of Nehemiah. For their part, the full-blooded, monotheistic Jews detested the mixed marriages and corrupted worship of their northern cousins. So walls of bitterness were erected on both sides and did nothing but harden for the next 550 years.
So here comes this Samaritan. Like the travelers before him, he sees the man lying by the road. In light of what I just told you, what would be his logical response? Curiosity? Revulsion? The words of the Samaritan woman in John 4:9 give us a clue. She said to Jesus, “Why are you, a Jew, asking me for a drink? …for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.”

But look what happened! Jesus said that the Samaritan had compassion on this wounded Jew. Whatever excuses motivated the inaction of the two previous passersby; this man offers no excuse for not helping. Can you imagine how this detail must have shocked the conscience of this lawyer and the others listening to Jesus? He knew how to get their attention!

Now let’s look at what the Samaritan did. He was not like the person James describes in his epistle. “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” I must confess, I have fit James’ description too often.

But the Samaritan, moved by his compassion for a fellow-sufferer, goes to him and applies the resources he has at hand to alleviate his suffering. Wine was used to cleanse and oil to soothe. These were the usual remedies for sores, wounds, etc. Hippocrates, father of the Hippocratic Oath, prescribed for ulcers, “Bind with soft wool, and sprinkle with wine and oil.”

Not only does he tend the man’s wounds, he lifts him onto his own donkey, carries him to the nearest place of lodging, and spends the night caring for him. Remember, this is a Samaritan caring for a Jew! Under any other circumstances the Jewish man would never enter under the same roof as the Samaritan. So this is really strange, unusual.

But Jesus isn’t finished yet; there’s another detail to the story! In the morning, the Samaritan prepares to continue on his journey. Before he leaves he goes to the proprietor and gives him some money; the equivalent of two days wages. He says “Take care of this fellow, and if you spend more on his care than what I’ve given you, I’ll pay it back when I return this way.” Talk about thorough? This is true compassion, true hospitality; all from the hand of a man whom the Jews of the day would’ve referred to as a dog!

Now, let’s recap the major characters of the story. We have one Jewish man along the road half-dead. The wording implies there’s some doubt as to whether or not he’s going to survive. We have two Jewish men, religious men, a priest and a Levite, who pass by without offering any assistance. We have a despised Samaritan whose compassion motivates him to use his own resources to minister to the needs of a stranger.
The first question that comes to my mind in response to Jesus’ story is – why? Why did this Samaritan do what he did; while the priest and the Levite refused to help?

My conclusion is this; the Samaritan knew how to obey the Law – from a transformed heart. The religious men knew how to obey the law from the head; a list of rules and regulations. They knew what the Law said, but they had exceptions. Their lack of concern and compassion for a suffering fellow human illustrated their lack of genuine love for God. As the apostle John said, “If a man say, I love God, and hate his brother, he is a liar: for he that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”

Something had happened in the heart of this Samaritan to motivate his response to the injured Jew. He evidently had met Jesus at a previous time and embraced His message. He wasn’t asking what he should do to inherit eternal life; his actions demonstrated that he had eternal life!

Now you may wonder how I can say that the Samaritan had eternal life. What other explanation is there for the laying aside of racial prejudice and ethnic hatred? What is it that motivated his compassion, the use of his personal resources to meet the needs of a total stranger, and a Jewish stranger at that? What about the sacrificial giving of his time, attention, and finances? Is this just evidence of a temporary burst of goodwill? Was he just having a “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” kind of day? No, the details of this story point to a radical change in this man’s life.

Jesus closes His narration of the story by asking the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, [became] proved to be a neighbor to the one who fell among thieves?” I love the way Jesus turns the lawyer’s question. The lawyer asked, “Who am I to love as my neighbor?” Jesus turns the question to “Who is the man that shows that love?” Jesus arranged the narrative so the lawyer would be forced to answer his own question; in a way that left no wiggle room to escape!

Now the easiest way for the lawyer to answer Jesus’ question would have been two words; “the Samaritan.” But that would have sounded heretical on his Jewish lips, and the lawyer cannot bring himself to utter those words. So he says the neighbor was - “the one who showed mercy.” He was compelled to give a reply very different from what he would like. Not only condemning his own people, but those who should be the most exemplary, the religious leaders. And finally, he was forced to commend the Samaritan, one of a deeply hated race.
Jesus’ final words to this lawyer were simple; so simple they cannot be manipulated or misconstrued. “YOU go, and do likewise.” The emphasis is on the “you.” Here was Jesus’ answer to the original question; “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The lawyer who came to test Jesus assumed that when he dotted all the Is and crossed all the Ts, when he had completed the checklist, then he would have eternal life. But my friend, eternal life is not found in a formula; it is not found in knowing the Law or the Scriptures from cover to cover. Eternal life is not found simply by responding to an “altar call” or an invitation to raise your hand to accept Jesus. It is not found in reciting the Apostle’s Creed, or having your name on a church membership role, or by attending worship services at least once a week, or by participating in the Lord’s Table. All of those things can be part of receiving and experiencing eternal life, but they are not the essence of it. There are people who are doing, or have done, all these things yet they don’t have eternal life.

Jesus teaching in this text clearly shows us that the essence of eternal life is a relationship. It is a relationship with the Father that transforms my relationship with people. “For God so loved the world…” And what did that love motivate Him to do? “He gave His only, begotten Son…” Do you see how the Samaritan modeled the Father’s example? His heart was filled with compassion – he loved; so he gave – of his resources to meet the needs of another, a complete stranger. Jesus did that for you and me; “While you and I were still in our sins, Christ died for us.” That is how you and I receive eternal life, by accepting Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. By faith, His fulfillment of the Law, His righteousness, becomes ours at the moment of surrender and we inherit eternal life.

And then Jesus said, “YOU go and do likewise.” That word is for you and me as much as for the lawyer who raised the question.

My friend, if you are truly born-again, I’m not trying to get you to doubt your salvation. I only want you to consider the evidence of the eternal life you claim as your own. The apostle Paul reminds us it is important to examine ourselves periodically to make sure we are walking in truth and light.

So as you reflect on this portion of Scripture, where do you fit in the scene described? Are you with the priest and the Levite, or with the Samaritan? Or maybe you see some of both. I see both in my life. How many times have I passed by someone in need because I didn’t have
time, or because the situation seemed hopeless, or because involving myself in a particular situation would include a personal cost?

Are these wrong choices evidences of the eternal life I have in Christ and of His nature that resides in my spirit? No, they are evidences that there are areas of my mind, will, and emotions that are not yet conformed to His image. They are evidences I need, in the words of Romans 12:2, a further renewing of my mind. They are evidences that I need to allow God’s Holy Spirit a greater degree of control in my life. If I allow Him to control my choices I will respond to human need just like the Good Samaritan. My actions will clearly demonstrate my possession of eternal life.

If you’re listening to me now and you have never been born-again, never surrendered control of your life to Jesus Christ, today is the day of salvation. But I must offer a word of caution; it is not a decision to me made lightly. Jesus offers salvation freely but reminds those who choose to follow Him that it will cost them everything. Earlier in Luke’s Gospel Jesus said to His followers; "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."

My friend, now you know how to inherit eternal life. What will your choice be?