

Job 23:1-8, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Our Gospel story this morning is a familiar one. It is the story of the rich man who has a question for Jesus. Many scholars have debated whether the man was serious or not, but I think that is a red herring. How Jesus answers the question and why He answers it the way he does is the focus of this passage. Jesus answers the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life" by simply saying "keep the commandments." Jesus is clearly making the correlation between the commandments in the Torah and life. Notice that the original question was about how to enter "eternal life" yet Jesus doesn't quite answer that question but goes in a different direction.

There is a little phrase used in this passage that is a microcosm of theological gems, but we don't see it because it isn't there in the translations. The phrase, in verse 17 of the Gospel reading, is "inherit eternal life."

To understand what the man is asking Jesus, we have to understand what the words "life," "eternal" and "inherit" mean to the people that heard the question.

We think of life as being something made up of three parts; body, soul, and spirit. We understand the physical body and we see the spirit as our connection with God. But we think of life as being something in the soul. The problem with that is it's a Greek concept, not Hebrew. To the Hebrew mind, there are only two divisions. There is our body and our soul. Those are easily defined. The body is the physical world - what you see. It's what's around us. Its those things we can touch and feel and comprehend with our five senses. The soul however is what's inside of us. It is what we would refer to as the real me. It's what's inside, not what's outside. A great example of this is over in Psalm 103:1, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and *all that is within me*, bless his

holy name.” “All that is within me.” That is the soul. That’s what the Hebrew sees as being life. That which gives us a reason for being is life.

The word *eternal* in Hebrew is best defined by the tenses of its verbs. There are only two tenses for Hebrew verbs. We have three in English: past, present and future. In Hebrew, you have only perfect and imperfect. With a perfect verb, you are thinking in terms of things being complete or finished. They are done, over with. There is nothing you can do about them. Then there is the imperfect. Those are the things that are not finished, that are happening now. They may have started in the past and could go into the future. It often denotes movement toward a goal. That is the concept of eternity to the Hebrew mind. It is something that has started. We are in the midst of it now. It is ongoing. It will continue in some form or another. There is no time element involved in this type of verb. That is eternity - the lack of time, not a measure of time.

I would imagine the man in the Gospel is a man of great wealth, of means, of possessions. I think that he lives a life that all of his friends are envious of. All the neighbors look out every morning and say, “there’s so-and-so, he’s got it made”. But the fact that he’s asking this question of Jesus tells us something. He is looking for something. He’s asking Jesus what do I have to do so that what’s inside of me (my soul) parallels what all of these people are seeing (my body)? In other words, this man is asking Jesus, “how can I be happy? How can I be complete? How can I be what people think I am?” That’s the real question that he is asking. And how do we know that? Because he uses the word *inherit*.

The concept of inheritance here is a little different from what we have. It is much richer and more expressive. The Hebrew word *inherit* can also refer to a wadi. We know a wadi as the bed or valley of a stream that is usually dry

except during the rainy season and that often forms an oasis. Most of the time, it's dry and barren but after the spring rains, it can be full of water, flowing, refreshing and life-giving. That's the concept of an inheritance to the Hebrew. Standing in a dry river bed anticipating the water flowing down over us, refreshing us. Inheritance to the Hebrew is anticipation. There's the old saying that when you wake in the morning, you can say one of two things. You can say "Good Morning, Lord," or you can say "Good Lord, Morning." That's the difference anticipation can make - when we can say "Good Morning Lord. What's gonna happen today? I'm anticipating what's going to happen in my life today." That's the Hebrew inheritance. So, this man is asking, how can he have a life of anticipation inside that matches what the people see on the outside.

Notice, however that Jesus does not quite answer the question that the man asked. The man asked what must I do to inherit eternal life? In Matthew, we get a little different slant than what we see here in Mark. Over in Matthew 19, it says that Jesus answered and told him "if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." Jesus doesn't say anything about eternal life, he talks about life. In other words, the rich man's focus was on what is coming. Jesus says you need to be focusing on what is now.

Jesus tells the man that he needs to sell everything he has and follow him. There is a whole theology that's developed out of that verse that we won't get into today but, just be assured that Jesus is not telling us to live a life of depravity or poverty. He is saying something entirely different. But that's another story. Jesus is getting at the very heart of the issue with the man. He knows what is of the greatest value to the man.

That is why Jesus goes on to say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

There have been many, many theological explanations of this verse. One of the most popular is about a certain gate in the old city of Jerusalem called the Needle's Eye and how a camel has to get down on its knees to get through this gate. The problem with that is there is no widely accepted evidence for the existence of such a gate.

The issue with this verse is that word *camel*. Modern theologians and biblical scholars now understand that Jesus most likely never said anything about a camel. The word used here is an old Aramaic word. In the Aramaic language, similar to the Hebrew language, words don't have vowels; they have vowel points which were developed many years later. When these words were written, there were no vowels. We really don't quite know what the word was. Many years ago, a biblical scholar named Dr. George Lamsa did some studies on this verse. I had the opportunity and pleasure of meeting and talking with Dr. Lamsa several years ago and he was a fascinating man. Dr. Lamsa was born and raised in an area of Armenia and spoke Aramaic as a child. It was his native language. He has written several books on misinterpretations of Bible passages that have happened because we don't understand the Aramaic language. In this verse, he finds the same thing that many scholars before him found. Most likely, the word the Jesus used was not *camel* but the word *rope*. The Aramaic word *camel* and the word *rope* differ only in the vowel points which were not there when the passage was written. Imagine, a needle that is used to repair tents. This is a large, wooden needle with a large eye. Now, you want to push a rope through that large eye. What happens? The center or core of the rope goes through the needle's eye but much of the material on the outer part is sheared away. It falls off. What Jesus is saying is that it's not that a rich man cannot get into heaven. What He is saying is that a man can enter heaven, but some things may have to be sheared away.

The rich man left because he had too many possessions to give up. What he owned was too good to let go of so that he could inherit something better.

This raises the question this morning as to what we might be hanging on to instead of giving up to inherit the better, to gain that life of anticipation. The passages that we read this morning allude to some things that might be getting in the way.

We read from the book of Psalms this morning. Many psalms are known as Ascent Psalms. These are psalms that were chanted as the pilgrims climbed or ascended the steps to enter the Temple to worship. So, the scriptures ask us this morning if our religion is more precious to us than the life that we could inherit. How could religion be something that would get in the way of our having a better life? When religion, when our church, becomes so important that we lose sight of its purpose and its goal, then it is a stumbling block. When we are concerned about how many people are in attendance but not concerned about how many people are hungry, our religion is a hindrance. When we are more concerned about the roof on our building than we are about the people who have no roof to live under, it is an obstacle. When we become more concerned about our light fixtures than we are about the people who have no light of hope and live in the darkness of depression, then it is time for something to be sheared away.

The Old Testament reading talked about Job's desire to know what God is doing, what is happening in his life. Job is pleading with God to have a discourse with him so that Job would understand, and, tacitly, approve of what God is doing. Sometimes, our intellect and need to know can get in the way of what God wants to do. When we have to understand and know the consequences, we can stand in the way of what God wants. And we have to recognize that this may be in the life of someone else, also. Many times, well-

meaning folks will take on the role of the Holy Spirit and try to work things out in the life of someone around them. In reality, what they end up doing is hindering what God was doing in their life. In other words, when we have to be in control of things, we are in the way. Often, we can have just a gut feeling that we need to do something. We can't explain it or understand it, but we can't get rid of the feeling. We don't do it because we would not be in control. The scripture tells us to recognize that what we are feeling may be the Holy Spirit directing us into something better. It may be time for us to give up control.

The passage in Hebrews talks about seeking help from God, of admitting that we have a problem that we can't deal with. We are told that we should go before God, through Jesus, to admit our situation and seek God's help. The old song, *Just a Little Talk with Jesus* is what fits here. But we don't ask. Why not? Usually, it is just plain old pride. "I am a self-made success." "I can deal with things myself." "I don't need outside help." "What would other people think if they knew I was too weak to handle this?" But, scripturally, we are told that we do need help – we all do. There are times when life gets to be too much. As the mountain philosophers say, sometimes you are the bug and sometimes you are the windshield. And sometimes pride stops us from admitting which is which. Pride can easily get in the way of us receiving the better. Can we set aside our pride for the sake of getting something better?

When we are ready and willing to have the things that stand in the way of our inheritance peeled away, then Jesus makes a promise to us. At the end of the chapter, He says that anyone who does this will receive a hundredfold back. And when will we receive it? In this life and in the life ahead of us. We will finally receive that life of anticipation, a life that can say "Good Morning, Lord."

In the name of the One God; Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.