
Prayers

To God

Praise God for the gifts of song and worship. Offer Him thanks for the songs you sing that feed your soul, for the psalms that remind us of the power and authority of God and the dependency of our souls, and for those glorious hymns that inspire your faith.

For myself

Weekly theme: discipleship

Thank You, Lord God, for the hopes and the dreams You have given me. Help me to appreciate how these things fit into the plans You have for Your Kingdom here on earth, and may I be content in doing my very best in Your service. I long to be Your disciple and to be faithful to Your call, both now and forever. **AMEN**

For others

Pray for the athletes who are preparing to compete at the London Olympics. Pray for their health and security at a time in their lives when they have a high public profile. Pray that the games will reflect the best of humanity, and pray against the evils that would work their way into this powerful and influential institution.

Meditation

Jesus, what do You see when You look at us?

Do you see people who put faith into practice?

Do you see people who live as if they know

That without Christ, sin will conquer this world?

Do you see people who talk to you in prayer,

Who share everything with You, in complete trust?

Do you see people who read Your Word,

Willing to dig deep to understand it and love it?

Do You see people who are energised by the Spirit

And transformed by the power of Your love?

Do You see people motivated to work for You,

Confident that God's grace will change the world?

Do you see people who are obedient, all the time,

Willing to do what You ask, whatever the cost?

Jesus, what do You see when You look at us?

Tell us the truth, so that we might be set free!

Bible Passage

Luke 10:25-28

²⁵ Just then, a certain lawyer came forward to test Jesus; he said,

"Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?"

²⁶ So Jesus asked,

"What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?"

²⁷ He answered,

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

²⁸ Jesus said to him,

"You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

Review

We can imagine the scene. Jesus has just spent time with a large group of seventy followers, discussing what happened when they began to do the same things Jesus did, by preaching, teaching, healing and casting out demons. Watching all this would be religious Jews who were deeply conscious of their duty to the laws of Moses. They had seen what the disciples were doing, but where did Jesus stand in relationship to the core beliefs of Judaism?

To those who looked on, Jesus appeared to be teaching a message of salvation by 'works', but the 'works' of His mission were very different to the 'work' of being obedient to the 'Law', by which Jews thought they were 'saved'. It was a reasonable concern, for even today, Christians on mission can all too easily give the impression that all God requires is for everyone to 'work' for Him. But Jesus did not preach a 'Gospel of works', and in this text, He redirects the discussion towards the heart of God, which calls for love. It is easy to read this passage and believe we understand it, but we must tread carefully. At the very least, it shows how Jesus challenges His questioner to think again about his religion. As we will see tomorrow, this reading sets the scene for the teaching of Jesus found in 'the Parable of the Good Samaritan' (10:29-37), but it deserves to be read in its own right.

The man who came to Jesus was a 'lawyer'. What does this mean? This man was not a legal professional in the modern sense, but a scholar of the Bible, especially of its first five books, and he would have acted as both a judge and a trainer of young men. In those days, disputes were settled by judges who searched the Bible and other Jewish texts for legal precedence. Moreover, they were responsible for training young men who would one day do the same work. Now Jesus was training His followers, and the lawyer was training his. So which one of them was doing God's will? Though we might not spot it, this is what lies behind the lawyer's question; *'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'* (10:25)

The question sounds simple enough to us, but in the first century, it went to the heart of religious belief, and defined where people stood within Judaism. The Pharisees believed that Jewish tradition required a belief in the afterlife, and therefore 'eternal life' with God, but the Sadducees were adamant that the 'Laws of Moses' made no reference to it, and they fiercely

disputed the afterlife. The two positions were irreconcilable, and the man who asked Jesus about eternal life knew this. He wanted to know where Jesus stood within Judaism.

Not surprisingly, Jesus proceeded to turn everything upside down, as He often did when challenged. He gave no answer about eternal life, but asked another question, leading the lawyer away from his question by asking him to consider not the afterlife, but the heart of his faith in God (10:26). At this point it is worth remembering that similar conversations take place in Mark 12:30f. and Matthew 22:37f, except that in Mark and Matthew, the question '*what is the greatest commandment*' is put to Jesus by a scribe, and His answer is none other than same as that given here by the lawyer!

What is going on? Some suggest that these are all reports of the same incident. Personally, I reckon that there were perhaps many occasions when Jesus talked about such things, when perhaps Jesus or his opponents quoted a summary of the law during their animated conversation about the will and heart of God. The three reports we find in the Gospels reflect just this.

However the idea of summarising Old Testament Law like this (10:27) was new. In his reply, the lawyer said God's law encompassed two great Old Testament texts. Firstly, from Deuteronomy 6:5, '*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, ... soul, ... strength, ... mind*', and secondly, the social command in Leviticus 19:18, '*love your neighbour as yourself*'. But whose idea was it to put these two famous texts together? Did the lawyer do this, or did Jesus do it (as in Mark 12:30 and Matt 22:37). The same idea is written in two early Jewish documents, but scholars are uncertain about when they were written, so no one knows when this was first put forward (see – 'Going Deeper')!

Suffice to say that the joining of these two great texts is immensely powerful, whether an original idea or not, and here, Jesus responded well to it. Together, they call on the believer to commit wholeheartedly to God, and show the same love and commitment to fellow human beings. The four key words in the sentence, '*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, ... soul, ... strength, ... mind*' (10:27) each describe an essential human characteristic, and they must all submit to show love towards God. The word 'heart' refers to human will, 'soul' to earthly existence, 'strength' to the power of the human frame, and 'mind' to the intellect. This is a truly powerful description of humanity, every part of which must love God. But the genius of this text is the addition of the command from Leviticus, which says that our love of God is inadequate if it does result in loving others (Lev. 19:18, 10:27)

Jesus' answer '*you have given the right answer, do this and you will live*' (10:28) is tantalising. Jesus seems to approve and be encouraging; but he goes on to teach the lawyer, through the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37), that there is more to learn. Perhaps Jesus' answer simply states the obvious; it is a good answer and those who do this reap the reward of eternal life. But who is so perfect as can live out a doctrine of justification by works, with eternal life achieved by fulfilling the requirements of the law?

Jesus knew that although such aims were always right, no one could accomplish this perfectly. He had come to reveal a new way to God's heart through Himself. When we read the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' tomorrow, we should bear this in mind. This great parable is not a glorification of right and loving deeds, it points to Jesus and all He will do for our salvation. This is what He wants the lawyer to know.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V25 *'gain eternal life'*

Other translations:

'receive eternal life' (NIRV)

'inherit eternal life' (NIV)

This is a small point, but the Greek word for 'inherit', while referring obviously to the receipt of an inheritance, is a general one that encompasses the ideas, 'come into possession of', 'share in', 'acquire'. Although it is fascinating, the idea of inheriting eternal life from Christ at the point of His death is difficult to pin down in the Bible, but it does not need to dominate our understanding of the phrase. It is quite sufficient to translate *'gain eternal life'*.

V26 *'what is your reading of it?'*

Other translations:

'How do you read it?' (NIV)

'What do you read there?' (NRSV)

The Greek sentence reads literally, *'how do you read?'* This confirms that Jesus was asking the lawyer a forensic question about his understanding and interpretation of the Jewish Law. He is not just asking the man to reply with a standard answer quoted from Scripture, but that is just the start of the exchange (see study).

V28 *'do this and you will live'*

Almost every translation contains these words, but we should be aware that the word used here for *'live'* was used to refer specifically to life eternal. Jesus' words are therefore an exact response to the lawyer's first question, *'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'*

Further Comments

The lawyer

The lawyer would have been an expert in the first five books of the Bible, and he would have known the passages he quotes from Deuteronomy and from Leviticus very well. It is likely that he was a Pharisee. So often in the Bible, the Gospel writers only use the term 'Pharisee' where they present a fierce opponent of Jesus, and our lawyer is not antagonistic. But a Pharisee would believe in eternal life and for him, the question would have been interesting and current in Pharisaic circles. It is doubtful that a Sadducee would have asked the question here.

Also, the question asked of Jesus was a typical form of engagement used by Pharisees and other rabbis. It was their way of engaging with others and setting out theories and beliefs in God, and to test them by Scripture. Answers to questions might well expose whether individuals leaned towards pharisaic beliefs or those of the Sadducees. However, Jesus' return question asking the lawyer to provide a summary of the Law was common practice for Pharisees. It invited someone to state his theological position.

Scholarly arguments (10:27)

The debate over whether the joining of these two commands is original or not is important. Some believe this was a characteristic of Jesus, but others think it was simply a reflection of discussions of the day. The debate centres around two ancient documents that contain the words *'love the Lord and your neighbour'*, the Testament of Issachar 5:2 and the Testament of Daniel 5:3. When scholars find such documents, their main initial work is to date them, and here, an accurate date will tell us whether these ideas were entirely new in Jesus' day or not. Unfortunately, the lack of supporting information about these texts and the technical inaccuracies of some carbon dating mean that there is no clear evidence whether the documents were written in the first century before Christ, or after Christ.

With no other evidence, we would be justified in saying this joining of these scripture texts is original, but it is not something we would be wise to push too far.

Works and not grace.

The Israelites of Jesus' day knew little of the grace of God. Despite their wretched history and the troubles they had endured because of their waywardness, the people of Israel were still heavily committed in obedience to the laws of Moses. God had led His people through many experiences of repentance for their sins, and had sent prophets warning of God's wrath and pointing out that the answer to sin lay only within the heart of God, not the Law, but Israel was trapped in religiosity.

The lawyer who asked the question, *'what must I do to gain eternal life'* might have expected the answer; *'all of Abraham's children are called to be in His bosom'*, but Jesus pointed the man back to the heart of what God required of His people. Jesus knew that God offered love and salvation and wanted love and commitment as a response, but as yet, even the disciples had not come to terms with what this might mean.

The four facets of humanity

The four facets of humanity mentioned in verse 27 are not always properly understood. The Bible in general offers us some help:

- The HEART is not the seat of the emotions, as it is thought in most Western countries today. In the Bible, the 'guts' are the seat of the emotions, and the term 'heart' usually refers to the human will. In addition, we should not think of the human will as some 'part' of an individual. It is all encompassing, for the 'will' to do something reflects the commitment of the whole person.
- The SOUL is not the invisible bit of humanity that accompanies the body. The best explanation of the soul is found in Genesis 2:7, where God is described as taking the dust of the earth (body) and breathing into this His breath (spirit), and thus making a 'soul'. This term is best thought of as describing all it means to be a 'living being'.
- The word STRENGTH means in Hebrew what it means in English. It refers to physical strength, but also mental strength, spiritual strength and intellectual strength. Indeed, every aspect of strength that makes people do what they do.
- The MIND is the God-given capacity to think and engage with the world around us. Sometimes, Christians downplay the role of the mind in Christian faith, insisting, quite rightly, that it has no part to play in the deliverance of the human soul. However, there are a very large number of Biblical texts that urge people to use their god-given minds to explore their faith and also the world around them (for example, Lamentations 3:1 Daniel 10:12 Romans 8:6,7, 12:1f., 1 Cor 14:15f., Rev 17:9)

The neighbour

A neighbour is more than one who lives next door. In general, the word as used in the Bible refers to those with whom one lives in community. In this sense, many people in the Western world do not live 'in community' with anyone else except perhaps for their own family.

Because of this, it can be hard to try and explain the term. It is best if we think of Jesus' appeals to us to 'love our neighbour' as an appeal to be loving in general towards everyone we come across and with whom we share a common humanity.

Discipleship

Application

Asking questions

In group discussions, many people hold back for fear of exposing themselves. Others ask questions and thereby deflect attention away from themselves to others. Sometimes scholars develop the technique of asking questions in order to keep discussions open and without conclusions. The lawyer in today's passage may well have done just this, fearful of the consequences of making a decision about Jesus.

People in general have many reasons for asking questions, but not all of them are useful and conclusive. In matters of faith, however, there must be no room for hedging around the essential questions about our relationship with God, and eventually, answers are required. Salvation is not founded on uncertainty or intellectual pursuit, but on deeds done by Christ for us. There may be many questions we can ask about this and what it ultimately means, but the love of God demands our response to it, and none of us will '*gain eternal life*' if we do not answer the question Jesus asks, about whether we will follow Him and have faith in Him.

Loving God ...

The focus of our passage is surely the verse at its heart, which puts together the two great commandments of the Old Testament (10:27). Only we can answer for ourselves whether we are indeed in love with God and also our neighbour, completely. Put like this it is a great challenge. We are saved by the grace of God, but our call is to be people who are so in love with God and our neighbour that we are never without a mission field, or something to do to put our faith into action.

Sometimes, church people become uncertain about what they should 'do' together apart from worshipping God on Sundays. In truth, this 'love of God' is but one half of the true practice of Christian faith, which is to be active witnesses to Christ in our communities because we feel deeply for the plight of those around us.

Eternal life

To live with God for all eternity is a great reward. Some have suggested it might be boring, but this idea can only come from those who have not enjoyed the heights of rapture in worship that can be enjoyed even while we are on earth. Once truly entered into and 'tasted', the idea that we will live together with God and forever praise Him becomes a great delight! This passage does not contain any description of eternal life, but it assumes that we want to be with God, as our Friend and Redeemer. Let us make sure that we have not become so clouded by the affairs of earth that we forget the rewards of heaven.

Ideas for what to do

- Read the passage of Scripture mentioned in this passage, especially, Deuteronomy 6:1-6 and Leviticus 19. The first passage is a summary of the Law (Deuteronomy 5, and Exodus 20), and the second is a fascinating social rule book for Israel. Try to

understand what these great passages meant and why they became so treasured by the Jewish people.

- Pray for those who spend their lives testing Jesus and edging around the world of faith. Pray that they will have the courage to jump fully into what it means to love God completely, and accept the salvation of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does it mean to us to '*love the Lord our God with all our heart ...*' (10:27)? Discuss how to put some flesh on this great Biblical verse, and interpret it in our lives.
2. Was the lawyer's question a trick question? Why did Jesus answer a question with a question? Do you think that Jesus' challenge was well answered by the lawyer?
3. To what extent does this passage deliver what may best be called 'a doctrine of works'? If it does not, then explain.

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have done so much for us that we do not know about or do not understand. Indeed, none of us knows the full extent of what Jesus has done for our salvation, but we rejoice in this and praise You for it. Open our hearts and our minds to perceive more and more of Your grace that we may be encouraged and blessed along the pathway of life.

AMEN
