

Every time a fancy car raced by the family minivan, the boy sitting in the back wondered: “What do I have to do to lay my hands on one of those beauties?” His sister sitting next to him, however, was more interested in the mansions they passed. Her hope was to live in such a place one day with servants attending her every need. What would they have to do to realize their dreams? One option would be to make lots of money. Then they could buy all the cars and homes they wanted. Another option would be to marry someone with lots of money.

Money, of course, can’t buy everything. It can’t get you eternal life in heaven, for example, the one thing that we should all want to lay our hands on considering the alternative is spending an eternity in hell. Yes, heaven and hell are real places, as real as the exclusive and all-inclusive Sandals resort in the Bahamas, and as real as the World War II concentration camp in Auschwitz, Poland. Only heaven is better than a five-star resort and hell worse than Auschwitz. So what must I do to get into heaven and stay out of hell? There are two options. Let’s find out what those options are.

If I want to stay at the Sandals resort in the Bahamas, I’m not going ask you how much it costs. I’ll check the resort’s website for accurate prices. Likewise if I want to know what it takes to get eternal life in heaven, I need to ask someone who comes from heaven. That person of course is Jesus. Thankfully someone once asked Jesus this very question of how to get eternal life. Listen to the exchange: “On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” 27 He answered: “‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” 28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:25-28).

According to Jesus, one option for obtaining eternal life is by loving God and our neighbor. It sounds so simple doesn’t it – the way juggling 3 plastic balls looks simple until you try it for the first time and can only manage a few throws before the ball all three balls skip away from you. Likewise loving God and loving our neighbor is not easy, as Jesus makes clear through the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

In this parable a certain man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked, beaten, stripped and left for dead. Thankfully help came in the person of a priest who happened to be travelling the same road. But the only effort the priest made when he neared the beaten man was to cross over to the other side of the road and continue on his way! Likewise a Levite, a temple worker whom we might compare to a Church Council member, also came upon the man. But he too passed on the other side without offering assistance. These men had not robbed and beaten the poor man, but they might as well have by refusing to offer help.

Why did these men not stop and help? The priest may have thought, “I just got done serving the Lord in the temple. I’m in a hurry to get home and see the wife and kids. I can’t stop and help this man. Anyway, I’m sure God will send someone else along to help him.”

What was the Levite’s excuse? Since the road between Jerusalem and Jericho offers many clear views of what lies ahead, the Levite may have seen the priest avoid the lump on the side of the road. If a priest hadn’t stopped to help, why should he bother? Anyway the robbers who had beaten the poor fellow might still be around. It was probably best to keep going.

Now compare the priest and Levite with the third traveler – a Samaritan. The Jews had a saying about these people: “He who eats the bread of a Samaritan is like one who eats the flesh of swine.” If Jesus had told this parable to modern Jews, he would have cast the Samaritan as a Palestinian. A Samaritan was the last person you would expect to offer assistance to a Jew

because of how they were treated by Jews. And yet listen to how far the Samaritan went in his service to the beaten man: "... when [the Samaritan] saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him [as opposed to stepping away from him as the priest and Levite had done] and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have'" (Luke 10:33b-35).

The Samaritan did not feel revulsion but compassion for the bloodied man. And look at what costly compassion it was. He took out his own oil and wine and poured these into the wounds to cleanse them. Ironically pouring out oil and wine before the Lord is exactly what the priest may have just finished doing as part of his liturgical work at the temple. It's too bad that the priest didn't see that pouring oil and wine into this man's wounds was also an acceptable way to worship God by showing love for his neighbor. Likewise God doesn't want us to think that the only place to worship him is in church where we sing hymns and give an offering. We serve and honor God whenever motivated by God's love we show compassion to others as did the Samaritan.

And the oil and the wine were only the beginning. The Good Samaritan took the man to an inn where he continued to care for him. And although he couldn't remain in person, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two silver coins for whatever medical attention the wounded man might need. According to one source, this was enough money for two months' room and board! And if that wasn't enough, the Samaritan promised to reimburse the innkeeper when he returned. Return? Yes! The Samaritan saw the wounded man's care as his ongoing debt, not someone else's problem. The fact that the innkeeper took the Samaritan at his word tells me that he knew this Samaritan or at least knew of his reputation as a kind and generous man. In other words this wasn't the first time the Samaritan had lent such a helping hand; it was his habit.

Now think back to why Jesus told this parable. He was answering the question: "How can I get eternal life?" Jesus answer was "Show love to anyone who needs your care, no matter who they are or what the cost. Continue to do this and nothing less than this and you will get eternal life." I don't know about you but the Parable of the Good Samaritan has never been my favorite. It makes me feel guilty. I don't have much in common with the Good Samaritan but everything in common with the priest. When people are in need, we're usually pretty good at figuring out why we don't have to help them – someone else will take care of it, it's not my problem, I don't have time, that person deserves it. I look back at my life as a pastor and how when my daughter was young, I was always working around the clock, and devoted very little time with her. So how will I ever offer costly help to an enemy as the Good Samaritan did? Oh, I might, might do it once in a while, but not all the time as Jesus commands.

So what are my chances of getting hold of eternal life by pursuing Option 1 and being a Good Samaritan? I have no hope. The only thing Option 1 promises is eternal damnation because I'm not a Good Samaritan as Jesus defines one. God's Word is clear about those who do not keep his laws perfectly: "Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" (Deuteronomy 27:26). It's no wonder I squirm in my seat when I read the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It shows just what a rotten person I am and how deserving of hell. And that's partly Jesus' point.

So is there any hope for us of getting eternal life? Not if we think we can do it by

being a Good Samaritan. But there is another option: believe in THE Good Samaritan. Who is that? It's Jesus of course. Didn't Jesus show the love described in this parable? He loved people who were his enemies – even healing the ear of man who had come to arrest him, for example. And Jesus spent more than a couple of silver coins to heal us of our sins, he shed his own blood. Option 2 is really the only viable option for getting eternal life isn't it? Jesus himself put it this way: "Whoever believes in [me] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son".

Failing to believe in Jesus means rejecting his work on our behalf. Imagine the wounded man shooing away the Good Samaritan insisting he can make it to the inn on his own. The truth is we are worse off than that wounded man. He was only half dead but the Apostle Paul says that we were totally dead in our sins when Jesus found us (Ephesians 2:1). And don't think that believing in Jesus means following his commands to get eternal life. That would be like the wounded man declining the Good Samaritan's oil, wine, and bandages and insisting he just leave behind his first aid manual. What good would that manual be if he doesn't have the strength or ability to bandage himself or scrounge food and water? Likewise although Jesus tells us to obey God's laws for eternal life, the simple fact is we don't have the ability to do that.

No, we need Jesus to attend to us, not just give us commands. We need him to pour his pure blood into our wounds to cleanse us of our sins. It's the only way we can get hold of eternal life. And Jesus has done this. And because Jesus has healed us we will go out and be a Good Samaritan to others no matter what the cost. Don't you think that's what that wounded traveller vowed? He may have once hated Samaritans like most Jews, but not anymore. And perhaps he had never bothered to help other stranded travellers but how could he walk by now after someone, a Samaritan at that, had stopped for him? In the same way we have every reason to emulate THE Good Samaritan – not because this how we get eternal life but because we have eternal life thanks to him. Amen.