

Good Master,

what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?

The quotation that forms the title of this exhortation is one that (if we are careful to follow our daily scriptural lessons), during the course of one year we have read 6 times, for it is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Each of the 3 accounts reveals details that are omitted in the other 2. Matthew opens with these words,

"And behold, one came running and kneeled to him and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Mark omits the 2 words "good thing," while Luke has it:

"And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

By joining the 3 narratives together we have the following picture. The character under study was a ruler who ran and kneeled before Jesus (thus acknowledging his authority over him), and asked the question—"Good Master, what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

It would appear that he thought some spectacular act of goodness on his part, some act of charity, some noble deed, would gain him eternal life. It was a presumptuous thought and one of ignorance. Jesus replied:

"Why callest thou ME good? There is NONE good, hut One—that is, God."

The 3 records are the same here, and we see a glimpse of the wonderful character of Jesus. He was one who by his life, his words, his character, showed himself far superior to his fellows, yet he did not claim any credit to himself; he wanted no praise. He knew of the side of his nature that he inherited from his mother—the sin-nature that enabled him to be tempted in all points as were his brethren. Yet he alone of all mankind rose above it. He knew that God, his Father, was above all, Who alone was good—while he, the son of God, was striving to obtain perfection. There is a first principle of scriptural teaching here. Christ is not the equal of God—never has been—and, as we see here, never claimed to be. There is ONE—that is God.

There is also another first principle taught here. The ruler recognized that he did not POSSESS eternal life. It was an inheritance, something that must be bestowed, and Jesus confirmed this fundamental truth, in telling him the requirements. The narrative in Matthew continues—

"But if thou wilt enter into life, KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS."

Mark and Luke say, "Thou KNOWEST the commandments." It is apparent that the ruler was familiar with the commandments—those rules of life which the Creator gave to Moses. It was the desire of every faithful Jew to keep them—yet they all failed—yes, and failed miserably. They knew the LETTER of the law, but not the spirit. Their form of worship had degenerated into a mere ritual, and as such was condemned so many times by Jesus. They only kept the outward appearance and Jesus knew this when he said to the ruler,

"But if thou wilt enter into life, KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS."

And his answer perplexed the ruler, for he said unto him, "Which?" And in Mark's narrative Jesus said,

"Thou knowest the commandments—do not commit adultery; do not kill; do not steal; do not bear false witness; defraud not; honor thy father and mother."

Luke's record is somewhat similar, but Matthew adds, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." And Matthew informs us,

"The young man said unto him, ALL these things HAVE I kept from my youth up; what lack I yet?"

Here something more is revealed. The ruler was a YOUNG man, and indeed his actions and words showed lack of mature thought. He thought that the observance of the Law according to the ritual of the day was enough. He did not understand the DEEPER things of the Law. Jesus' answer was not what he expected when he came running with those words,

"What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?"

For surely he had kept the commandments from his youth. Now Mark tells us something that reveals the character of Jesus,

"Then Jesus, beholding him, loved him."

The rich young man had made many errors. He was still in ignorance of the very fundamentals required, yet Jesus loved him—he was one of those "lost sheep of the house of Israel." Of the same people Jesus said,

"How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathered her chickens under her wings and ye would not!"

Jesus loved him despite his faults and said unto him,

"One thing thou lackest. Go thy way; sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and take up the cross and follow me."

What did the rich young ruler lack? He had power, wealth and position. He had in his own eyes kept the Law. What then did he lack? We can find a clue to the answer in his early remarks,

"What GOOD THING shall I do?"

He was accustomed to doing good things in his own eyes. He wanted to do a "good thing" for Jesus, but he lacked humility. He could not have heard the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount,

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

He was not a meek man. In his wealth and impetuous youth, he was proud. "ALL these," he said, "I HAVE kept from my youth up." How different were the remarks of Jesus,

"Why callest thou ME good?"

We can see the essential difference between the two—the humble, meek and loving Jesus, and the self-righteousness of the youth. And his wealth and position helped him not at all. In fact, they were encumbrances to him, for we are told by Matthew:

"But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples: Verily I say unto you that a rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of heaven."

Now this scriptural narrative can provide good lessons for us. There was a time in the life of every one of us when we first heard the words of Truth—when the desire to embrace it became uppermost in our minds. We had the burning ambition of youth, the zeal to do big things. We came to him and we, too, asked the question,

"What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

And an answer was given us,

"Repent, and be baptized—come ye out and be separate—walk ye in this way."

And we did not go away like the rich young man; we were baptized into the saving name of Jesus. But let us pause and reflect a moment. Have we remained faithful to our first vows? We did a good thing when we repented and were baptized, have we kept that good work up? That one act at the commencement of our probation is not enough. That was the young ruler's error. It is a CONTINUAL struggle, a perpetual fight, as Paul said,

"But I keep under my body and bring it into subjection lest that by any means—when I have preached to others—I myself should be a castaway."

The great apostle to the Gentiles was afraid lest he would be a castaway—how do WE stand? For some of us, many years have passed from the day of our immersion—for some, a short time. Have we, my brethren, kept those commandments? Do we lightly answer, "Yes, from my youth up," like the rich young man, or do we know the HIDDEN meaning?

"THOU SHALT DO NO MURDER."

No, brethren, we do not kill one another, but let us focus the light on the words of Jesus,

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou Shalt not kill: but I say unto you that whosoever is ANGRY with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment."

No, we don't kill, but, my brethren, are we angry without cause? ARE we, my brethren? Let us be reconciled to our brother—for anger without cause can place us in danger of the judgment.

"THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY."

But Christ said,

"Whosoever LOOKETH on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

See, my brethren, how far it goes! We may have kept the LETTER of the law from our youth—but have we understood the FULL meaning? Jesus said, "Come and follow me." Are we following him in the RIGHT way, or are we merely worshipping by lip and not by heart? Are we honoring our Father as we should? This was the 5th commandment, and Paul says it was the first commandment with promise. Christ was the full exemplification of this for "He did always those things that pleased the Father."

"THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS."

This is one of the most evil of sins, and one of the most common. Let us look at it this way—when we utter a false accusation against our brethren, we are no better than the priest and elders who sought false witness against Jesus to put him to death, and we will be classed with them. And when we bear false witness against our brethren, let us remember the words of Jesus,

"Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of my brethren, ye have done it to ME."

"Defraud not." Like the rich young man, do we say in all our dealing, "We are above reproach," or, "All these I have kept from my youth up?" Of course we would not defraud any one in our business relations. But let us focus the light on the DEEPER meaning. We are Christ's brethren and co-workers. Upon us alone rests the responsibility of keeping the lightstand burning. Do we do our part to the uttermost, or do we defraud our Master? If we are good workers we will always be ready and willing to work in the vineyard. But do we make excuses when it falls our lot to perform some ecclesial duty, or to attend a meeting? Are there always those ready excuses? Sometimes they are legitimate—illness and emergency happens to all. But are they just excuses—are we defrauding the Master and each other—ARE WE, my brethren?

Those commandments were part of the Mosaic Law. It was fulfilled in Christ and he revealed the true meaning—the real value of that code that a nation could not keep, for they followed the outward show, the pomp, the ritual, the ceremony, and did not understand the hidden things of the heart. Jesus showed us the perfect way and he said also,

"No greater commandment I give unto you than that ye LOVE ONE ANOTHER."

If we keep THAT commandment—if we really understand its FULL meaning—we will enter into the full life that forms the basis of the faith we call the Truth.

These are some of the lessons the young man did not understand. The commandments were so many words to him—bare facts. The full importance of the life he must live was unknown.

Now another thought on the commandments. When the commandments were given, there was the accompaniment of thunders and lightnings and a smoking mountain—so awe-inspiring that the people appealed to Moses for relief. But those impressions soon wore off, and in a short time were practically forgotten. When we first obeyed the call, we were full of the importance of the things of the Truth. How they impressed us! How are we doing through the passing years?

"We ought" (says the apostle) "to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip."

Now just a word on the last words of Jesus to the young man:

"... and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."

To what treasure was Jesus referring? Not to silver and gold, for the young man was very wealthy. No, to a far GREATER treasure—and I am going to quote from Mal.—

"Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened and heard it; and a BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His Name."

"And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in THAT DAY when I make up My jewels."

My earnest prayer is that your name and mine will be found in the Treasure Book of Remembrance.

—C. W.