

“What Must Be Done to Inherit Eternal Life?” based on Luke 10:25-37, Psalm 82, Colossians 1:3-14
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on July 13, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Over the last two weeks, we spent time with Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Now, we are back in the gospel of Luke, and we find Jesus sharing a story. Paul gave us some lists – the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. Jesus gives us a story. Paul gave us some practical advice to fulfill the law – Love your neighbor in general, and in the church, bear one another’s burdens as members of one family. Then Jesus tells a story about someone loving someone they don’t even know, and who might even be perceived as an enemy.

Now, both Paul and Jesus are answering the same question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Yet, despite Jesus’s answer, despite Paul’s answer, despite so many scriptures that deal with this, it seems we are always wrestling with this question today. Unfortunately, like the expert in the law who questions Jesus, we struggle with the answer, even when it seems so simple.

We look to “justify” ourselves, or “make excuses,” for why maybe that doesn’t apply to us exactly or how we’re fulfilling it, without actually doing it. But again, the answer is simple: love God and love your neighbor, and then actually do what you say you believe, through self-giving love, care, and mercy, for those who cannot repay you – the poor, needy, and humble, meaning those who are powerless.

Beloved, Paul and Jesus, the prophets, the Psalm writers, and all throughout scripture, have given this same and consistent answer, telling it in many different ways hoping one of them, maybe just one of them will click with us. And still, no matter how we hear it, we still are prone to justify ourselves and make excuses for ourselves and those we trust.

But the answer is simple: Love God and love your neighbor, and then actually live your life according to what you believe, through your self-giving love, care, and mercy, for those who cannot repay you – the poor, the needy, and the humble, or powerless.

We struggle so much with this, that sometimes it seems like we pit Paul against Jesus. Paul said we are saved by grace through faith, but are you saying Jesus said we must do works? No. Paul and Jesus are not at odds with one another on this.

Paul is saying you cannot accomplish your salvation by some work you do. I think Paul would be appalled by the ministries that make the claim that in one weekend through their efforts, some people, usually some amazing number, were “saved.” If nothing can accomplish your salvation for you – not circumcision, or any other act of faith, and not even scales tipped in your favor with more good things on the heaven side than the hell side – then how does one prayer coerced out of you result in salvation. No, that work is still a work.

Paul we are saved only by the grace of Jesus which is a gift that we did not deserve. By grace, God in Jesus shared in our humanity. God in Jesus lived in our flesh. God in Jesus died for us, rose for us, and now has sent the Holy Spirit to live and among us to work for God’s Kingdom. What Paul emphasizes, as do other writers in the New Testament (and the Old Testament for that matter) is that it all starts with God’s love for us – for you and yes for every single person. It means every person, even those who don’t agree with you and might even be your enemy. God loves them too.

It is by that amazing grace through faith – the faithfulness of Jesus and our faithfulness or allegiance to him – that we are saved to enter into eternal life. That prayer may be the starting point, just as the volunteer shift at a food pantry might be the starting point. The same goes for that time when you walk into a church, perhaps for the first time, that might be the starting point. It is then by faithfulness to Jesus that we follow through on that salvation.

The message remains simple, and Jesus makes this same point in other parts of the gospels, so let me expand it ever so slightly – God loves you with a never-ending, faithful love, not for anything you’ve done, but because you bear God’s image. And so God is merciful to you before you can do anything to earn God’s favor. Therefore, respond to this: Love God and love your neighbor, and then live your life according to what you say you believe, through your self-giving love, care, and mercy for those who cannot repay you – the poor, the needy, and the humble, or powerless. This is the message Paul and Jesus share. It’s the message we’ve had now for a third week in a row.

Now I want to point out something interesting because Psalm 82, which we used in our Call to Worship today is a very strange Psalm. I could spend hours going through this Psalm. It’s amazing, but I won’t take us down that rabbit hole. Still, what we see in this is God revoking eternal life from divine beings. The word in Hebrew is *‘elohim’* or “gods,” though it is often translated as “angels” or “divine beings.”

God the – the Most High God – asks these beings a question: “Why do you judge unjustly and favor the wicked?” Or it could also be translated, “Why do you vindicate the violently unjust, and show partiality to those guilty of hostility?” God then commands, “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly (or humble) and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

What do the divine beings do? They ignore God, just as we are prone to do and it shakes the foundation of the earth. So, God judges them and says that “even though you are gods, even though you are immortal, divine beings, yes, even though you are children of the Most High, you will die like mortals and fail just like any mortal leader on earth.

It reminds me of the letter of James in which he says, “Faith without works is dead...Even the demons believe – and shudder.” Yes, even the divine beings who judged unjustly and favored the wicked, who intellectually agree that the Most High God is real and exists, they shudder in fear. They intellectually agree, but there is no actual faith, or faithfulness in them. There is no allegiance to the Most High God.

They have no trust in God – there is only their own desire to be God themselves, to live without God, and to overthrow God’s authority and lay claim to power. But look what God said through the Prophet Micah. It’s not the right religious sacrifices with barrels of oil and the blood of lambs, but instead, “What does the Lord require? To do justice, to love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.”

I could roll out hundreds of scriptures, but I’m not going to right now. Instead, let’s get back to the Gospel of Luke and keep in mind that God loves you. Therefore, we are told to love God and love our neighbor so that we live according to what we believe, practicing self-giving love to those who cannot repay us – the poor, the needy, and the humble, or powerless.

I say, let's get back to Luke's gospel because this question is asked twice in the gospel: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The first instance is in today's reading. The questioner is a theologian, a '*nomikos*,' or someone who is "about the law," a lawyer, which among the Judeans of Jesus's day, meant an expert on the law. This would have been someone tasked with studying scripture, and therefore, would be skilled in its interpretation.

Jesus recognizes this and asks, "How do you read it?" or "In what way do you interpret the law?"

And so, it's not like the other passages where we get two commands that are said to be similar. The lawyer's interpretation is simple and makes it one command – love God and love your neighbor. Jesus tells him that he answered correctly, and says, "Do this and you will live." When the lawyers tries to justify himself, that's when Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The second time the question is asked is by the young ruler, which is also in Matthew and Mark. This man of authority asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus questions the man as to why he calls him "good" and I think this is a moment when Jesus points to his equality with God and the man recognizing it. So, this man has right belief.

Then Jesus says, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not lie, and honor your father and mother." The man says, "Awesome, I've done all of these." But Jesus says, "You lack one thing, go and sell all that you have and give to the poor. then follow me." This man has lived rightly, doing all the things that come easy to him, but the real challenge of caring for those who cannot repay him is the one he struggles with.

In both, we see love God and love your neighbor and then live your life according to what you believe, through your self-giving love, care, and mercy, for those who cannot repay you – the poor, the needy, and the humble – Yes, offer this self-giving love without selfish motives. Offer it to the powerless, those from whom you will get no power, authority, or status. This is the way we respond to God's love for us, which is not dependent on our power, authority, or status.

By this, you will live in eternal life, now and in the age to come. It's not accomplished. It's a gift given to us that we accept and step into. Beloved, the Samaritan in Jesus's story cares for the wounds of the man. He pours oil and wine as ancient disinfectants. He spends time with him, and pays for his care, all at a cost to himself.

The Samaritan in Jesus's day would have been considered a heretic, someone with wrong beliefs about who God is and God's plan for Israel. He was close, but off. He would have had only the five books of the Torah slightly modified to favor his favorite places of worship. He would have had wrong beliefs about who God is then and wrong beliefs about God's plan for Israel. Yet, he loves God because he sees God in the person injured on the road and cares for him.

The priest would have been a religious leader, right in all he believes. He would have been an authority in their faith. For the Levite, it's the same. He's a religious leader with the right ethnic heritage. He's a helper in the temple. Surely, he's right in what he believes. Yet neither one lives their faith in this moment. People try to make excuses for them as practicing their faith because they had to remain ritually clean to work in the temple. This implies they are walking from Jericho to Jerusalem. It doesn't say that. It seems they are walking in the same direction. They didn't have

to worry about ritual purity and re-entering the temple. They knew what God wanted them to do in caring for those in need of help and walked right by.

The Samaritan may be off somewhere in his theology, but he lives his faith in this story. We have an emphasis in our culture of seeing faith as intellectual ascent or right belief, knowing the right things. Even the demons know the right things, but if they have no allegiance to God, then their faith is dead.

Beloved, the things that we exercise are what get stronger. That's one of the things I love about this church – you exercise your faith when you buy for the Rainbow tree, when you volunteer for things like Feeding Kids Cleveland County. You exercise your faith when you put food in the community refrigerator, when you volunteer at our food pantry and others, when you give of yourselves to people who can never pay you back.

We are blessed to have many in our church who hold a higher status in our community by worldly standards, and so I am very thankful when I hear stories from people the world might consider of a lower status, expressing their gratitude for being treated by members of this church as equals. I love when they say that our members “are so down to earth.” I'm not going to call out names, but I've heard plenty of these stories. People are grateful when you treat them this way. That is being like the Good Samaritan. Thank you.

The things we exercise in that regard are the things that will get stronger. We may say we trust God, but we have to trust God enough to give generously without worrying about going without ourselves. We have to trust God to act without hope of getting anything in return. When we do this, our faith gets stronger. When we put ourselves in the shoes of others and practice empathy by seeing another and imagining, “What would I do if I was in their position?” and then doing what we would have wanted done for us, our faith gets stronger.

There are those who are trying to take down that word “empathy” now, there is not greater example of empathy than God becoming human, living in our flesh, in all of our limits, dying for us and rising for us. So don't let someone tell you empathy is toxic, because if empathy is toxic, then the implication is that Jesus Christ is somehow toxic and that is heresy. So, let's be clear on that.

None of us will ever be perfect in our intellectual grasp of doctrine, but all of us can practice our faith. All of us can give of ourselves in love. All of us can bear fruit as Paul wrote to the Colossians. All of us can bear those fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, kindness,

It's not about escaping to heaven but building for the Kingdom of God right here and right now in what we do for others. We are called as partners in Christ's service. Right belief matters. I will be the first one to defend not only the existence of God, but the Trinity and the efficacy of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. But all that means nothing if I do not fulfill the law by loving my neighbor, repenting of when I fail, and striving again to be faithful to Jesus each opportunity I get. This applies to us all because if scripture doesn't challenge us, we are not reading it right.

Let us give thanks for the ways we have exercised our faith and let us continue to exercise our faith to grow the muscles of love for God and for our neighbors through compassion and mercy like the Good Samaritan by our care even when we have nothing to gain from it. Amen.