

Eternal Life—Returning to the Intimacy of Eden

Luke 18:18–30

Have you ever been asked, “If you died today, would you go to heaven or hell?” It’s a question we often use when sharing our faith, and it can turn a conversation to spiritual matters and eternity. But too often, we reduce salvation to “fire insurance”—a ticket to escape hell and secure heaven. But, as we will see, eternal life is so much more. It’s not just about what we’re saved from—sin and death—but what we’re saved to: a new life, a restored relationship with God, the intimacy Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden. As the psalmist declares, *“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”* (Psalm 73:25–26).

This morning, we’ll see from Luke 18:18–30 that eternal life is not earned by good works and it’s more than an eternal dwelling, it’s being brought back into a right relationship with God through faith in Christ, which restores us to the intimacy of Eden by His Spirit.

Main Idea: Eternal life is being reconciled to God through faith in Christ, restoring us to Eden’s intimacy by His Spirit.

Let’s unpack this through three truths.

1. What Is Eternal Life? Knowing Jesus

First, eternal life is knowing Jesus. In Luke 18:18, a rich young ruler—a man of wealth, status, and morality—comes to Jesus and asks, *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Jesus responds, *“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone”* (v. 19).

It’s important to clarify that Jesus isn’t sidestepping the question; He’s cutting to the heart of the matter. The ruler assumes eternal life is a prize he can achieve by being good enough, but Jesus challenges his understanding of goodness. As Kent Hughes explains, “By questioning the ruler’s use of ‘good,’ Jesus was forcing him to consider whether he truly recognized Him as divine, for only God is good.” The ruler saw

Jesus as a teacher, not the Son of God, and eternal life as a checklist, not a relationship. And because he didn't have a saving knowledge of Jesus and wasn't born again, he couldn't know the Father's love or walk with Him.

Now John 17:3 defines eternal life clearly: *"This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."* Eternal life isn't just a future place; it's the present experience of knowing Jesus, our portion forever (Psalm 73:26). My five-year-old grandson, Adrian, got this when he told me about the "sneaky snake" who lied to Adam and Eve and convinced them to doubt God's goodness. Before their sin, Eden was a paradise of communion—God walking with them and sharing His presence and love (Genesis 3:8). That's eternal life: knowing Jesus, trusting His goodness, and walking with Him.

But like the ruler, many often think that the Christian life is about checking boxes—church attendance, good deeds, and one day making it to heaven. It's not. Picture a child running to their father's arms, not because they've earned it, but because they trust his love. That's the heart of eternal life.

So, what does the rich young ruler's interaction with Jesus have to do with us today? It has everything to do with us! If you're an unbeliever, separated from God by sin and self-rule, like the ruler, you can't know Him until you're born again through faith in Jesus. Trust His death and resurrection today to receive forgiveness of sin and the privilege of a relationship with God in this life and forever. The ruler had religion, and rules, but He didn't have a transformational relationship.

If you're a believer, you've been given this privilege of being in relationship with the Father by grace. Deepen it by spending time with Him in prayer, Scripture, and worship, not to earn His favor, but to grow in His love.

2. Why the Ruler Missed It: Self-Reliance Blocks Eternal Life

Secondly, the rich young ruler missed eternal life because his self-reliance and idolatry blocked the way. After asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus lists commandments from the second table of the Law, governing our relationships with others: “Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother” (Luke 18:20). The ruler confidently replies, *“All these I have kept from my youth”* (v. 21). He thinks he’s earned the gift of eternal life. But Jesus sees his heart and says, *“One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”* (v. 22). But the man walks away sad. Why? Verse 23 says, *“for he was extremely rich.”*

It’s important to note here that Jesus’ command to give all to the poor wasn’t about earning salvation. It was a mirror to expose the ruler’s true god, namely his wealth, which was a violation of the first table of the Law: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

As Kent Hughes writes, “The ruler’s wealth was not the problem; his heart’s attachment to it was. Jesus’ call to follow Him demanded a surrender of self-reliance and self-rule.” Like Adam and Eve were deceived into doubting God’s goodness (Genesis 3:8–9), the ruler chose his idol over intimacy with God. As Oswald Chambers notes, “The essence of sin is the suspicion that God is not good.” Unlike the tax collector in Luke 18:13, who prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13), the ruler’s self-reliance blinded him to his need for Jesus.

Moreover, he saw eternal life as a place to be earned—a kingdom with treasures—rather than a relationship with the King, Jesus Himself. As John Piper states, “Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God. And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God.”

The ruler’s idolatry kept him from God, but others who encountered His holiness found grace. Consider Isaiah, who saw the Lord on His throne, with seraphim crying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts”

(Isaiah 6:3). As the temple shook, and was filled with the awesome presence of God, Isaiah was undone. He didn't boast about his prophetic role or moral life. Rather, God's holiness exposed his sin, and he cried, *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"* (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah wasn't thinking he could earn God's favor; he was gripped by his need for mercy. As a result, God graciously provided a symbolic coal from the altar to purify and cleanse him of his sin (Isaiah 6:7), and Isaiah then responded with surrender: *"Here I am! Send me"* (Isaiah 6:8).

Brothers and sisters, when we encounter God's goodness and holiness, we don't boast about our accomplishments or cling to idols. We're broken, driven to our knees, crying for mercy.

What's holding you back from receiving Christ as Savior and Lord, or from serving His kingdom purposes? Is it money, pride, or status? Turn from your self-reliance and self-rule. Come to Jesus, humbly trusting in Him, knowing only His mercy can save you and only His power can transform your life.

This brings us to our final point:

3. How to Have Eternal Life: Trust Jesus for Salvation and Transformation

Eternal life comes by trusting Jesus, who alone makes salvation possible and transforms us by His Spirit. Stunned by Jesus' words that it's *"easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God"* (Luke 18:25), the crowd asks, *"Then who can be saved?"* (v. 26). Jesus answers, *"What is impossible with man is possible with God"* (v. 27). As Thabiti Anyabwile notes, "God can save a rich man, but it will be an act of His grace, not a result of wealth."

In response, Peter declares, *"We have left our homes and followed you"* (v. 28). And Jesus promises:

“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or family for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29–30).

Beloved, Jesus isn't demanding we abandon all possessions, but that we treasure Him above all, as Peter, who was still a work in progress, began to do through faith. The “many times more” that Jesus spoke of begins now—not in material wealth, but in the joy of knowing Jesus through the Spirit, as the psalmist sang, *“Whom have I in heaven but you?”* (Psalm 73:25).

As some of you may be familiar with, Dionne Warwick's classic song says, “A house is not a home when there's no one there to hold you tight.” So too, the believer's soul finds its true home in Jesus' presence, and we long for heaven because He will be there in all His fullness. Without Jesus, heaven would not be home.

Now, for those outside the kingdom, eternal life begins in a moment of faith. You're lost, separated from God by sin, like Adam and Eve banished from Eden. That was the rich young ruler's condition, separated by sin from a relationship with a holy and loving Father.

But Jesus came to bring you back. As 1 Peter 3:18 says:
“Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

When you trust Jesus, His death for your sin, and resurrection, the Holy Spirit makes His home in your heart, as Ephesians 1:13–14 describes, sealing you as God's own and granting you the privilege of knowing Him. This is salvation—not just escaping eternal judgment, but reconciliation with God, a new life starting now, where Jesus becomes your portion forever (Psalm 73:26).

For those who are already saved, eternal life is a journey of growing in intimacy with Christ. Salvation isn't the end; it's the beginning of a life transformed by His Spirit. As I've said, “We don't get good to get saved; we get saved to get good, to be transformed into the image of

Jesus” (2 Corinthians 3:18). But this intimacy doesn’t happen automatically.

As Pastor Adrian Rogers powerfully taught, “faith cannot be outsourced.” Just as a marriage requires intentional investment to maintain intimacy—time spent together, listening, and sharing—our relationship with Jesus demands the same. When Jesus rebuked the church in Ephesus for abandoning their first love, He gave the remedy: remember, repent, and return to the first works (Revelation 2:4–5). Beloved, no one else can do this for you.

How do we grow in this relationship? We must study theology, but deepening our relationship with the Father is more than that; it’s encountering Jesus’ presence through a life of prayer and Scripture. I appreciate how Tim Keller put it:

"Prayer, essentially, is answering God. He started the conversation—we did not. This means he sets the agenda and dictates the terms. Our voices are responding to his, not the other way around.

It is therefore impossible to have a rich prayer life apart from careful attention and glad submission to God’s word. Otherwise, we will end up talking to a figment of our imagination—in essence, praying to an idol. But if we hope to anchor our life in “the real God,” we must pray in accordance with who he’s revealed himself to be. **WITHOUT PRAYER THAT ANSWERS THE GOD OF THE BIBLE, WE WILL ONLY BE TALKING TO OURSELVES.**" Tim Keller

When we pray in response to God’s revelation of His love, holiness, and grace, we experience His presence. And that intimacy becomes the power to overcome temptation. Through prayer and Scripture, Jesus’ love fills us with what 19th-century pastor Thomas Chalmers called “the expulsive power of a new affection.” Like a dog dropping a bone for a steak, we let go of sin’s pull because Jesus’ love is far greater (John 15:11).

This is the story of Eden’s restoration. When Adam and Eve sinned, they hid, but God came near, calling, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

“God exposed their sin “in order that he might cover it—he revealed it in order that he might forgive it” (Alistair Begg). And Jesus fulfilled God’s promise in Genesis 3:15, by crushing the serpent and becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13) on the cross to restore us back to the intimacy of the garden.

But this intimacy with Christ, this return to Eden, requires us to be deeply rooted in Him, not distracted by the shallow trends of our day. Too many churches today have drifted into what some call the “youth groupization” of the church by prioritizing entertainment over substance. Recently I saw a pastor riding a roller coaster on a church stage, built for the occasion, to illustrate a sermon. This is one of many examples for how churches cater to a consumer-driven crowd.

Charles Spurgeon warned of this over a century ago, saying, “A time will come when instead of shepherds feeding the sheep, the church will have clowns entertaining the goats.” When church leaders rely on fog machines or spectacle, they may attract attention, but they risk producing churches that are “a mile wide and an inch thick,” — churches that are spiritually shallow and disengaged. You know, I’ve noticed in some churches that many don’t sing with lifted voices, even with concert-style praise teams. This can be the case because many come to be served, not to worship.

To know Christ and bear fruit for His kingdom, we must turn from the consumerism that drives many churches today and deeply root ourselves in our relationship with Jesus (John 15:5).

We need to do more than hear sermons, or read the Bible; we need to interact with God through His word and respond to His revelation in prayer. Again, prayer is more than petitioning God for stuff, prayer is answering God.

Concerning interacting with God’s word, Nancy Lee DeMoss shared in a recent interview, “interacting with God’s Word through journaling and meditation allows it to take root in our hearts,” shaping our identity in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when we're rooted in Christ, we find "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8), and our worship becomes vibrant. We gather not to be entertained but to lift our voices in praise, engage with the Word, and serve one another.

Recently, I heard a preacher named Marshall Segal share these words that I deeply resonate with: "Meeting with God (alone every day and then with our church family) is the habit that has most dramatically changed my life. It really does touch every other thing I do."

Marshall Segal's words resonate deeply because my time with God in prayer and Scripture has become the heartbeat of my faith, a delight that touches every part of my life. Like Segal, I've journeyed from neglect—skipping devotions or treating them as a checklist—to discipline, and finally to delight, where I now cherish those quiet moments with Jesus. Psalm 1:1–3 paints this picture: the blessed man delights in God's Word, meditating day and night, flourishing "like a tree planted by streams of water."

Let me asked you, is your time in prayer and the Word more of a duty than a delight? How do we move from discipline to delight in daily Bible reading? To approach your time in God's Word effectively, Marshall Segal offers five short prayers in the acronym FEAST:

- *Focus my mind* to shut out distractions (Psalm 119:37);
- *Enlighten my eyes* to see Your truth (Psalm 119:18);
- *Address my sin* to forgive and transform me (Psalm 51:10);
- *Satisfy my soul* with Your love (Psalm 90:14);
- *Train my hands* to obey and serve (James 1:22).

For me, this daily habit of meeting with God, savoring His presence through His Word, and responding in prayer has brought joy, clarity, and strength, spilling over into my relationships and decisions. It's not just about understanding or obedience but finding satisfaction in Christ Himself.

Brothers and sisters, is your time with God a duty or a delight? If it feels like a chore, pray for God to make it a privilege, a moment to enjoy Jesus, because that intimacy will change everything.

Again, eternal life isn't just escaping hell or reaching a heavenly place; it's the experience of knowing Jesus, our portion forever. The rich young ruler thought he could earn it, but his self-reliance blinded him to his need for mercy.

Conclusion

If you're outside the kingdom, are you like the ruler, clinging to control? Or will you trust Jesus, like the tax collector, admitting your need for mercy? Pray now: "Lord, I'm a sinner. I trust You and Your death and resurrection to save me."

If you're a believer, don't take eternal life for granted and drift from Jesus. Take ownership of your relationship with God. Spend personal time in His Word and prayer, responding to who He is, letting His love transform you. Salvation, as Adrian Roger's put it, "is not getting man out of earth into heaven; it is getting God out of heaven into man."

So let's daily walk in close communion with Jesus, trusting His goodness, experiencing His love, and letting His Spirit transform us from the inside out for the greater fame of Jesus.