

What Was Expected?

THE

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*Therefore many other signs
Jesus also performed in the
presence of the disciples, which
are not written in this book;
but these have been written so
that you may believe that Jesus
is the Christ, the Son of God;
and that believing you may
have life in His name.*

John 20:30-31

*I came that they may have life,
and have it abundantly.*

John 10:10b

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If you have a 2,000-piece puzzle to put together, you probably start by first finding the edge pieces and connecting them together. Then the hard part begins, placing all the interconnecting parts that make up the whole. When we look at the rich young ruler’s spiritual puzzle, it appears as if the puzzle has too few or possibly too many pieces to make a clear picture. Just how do all the components fit together?

Both the lawyer and the rich ruler asked, “What shall I do [in order] to inherit eternal life?” A typical cause-and-effect relationship emerges. “What shall I do” on the part of one party has an ensuing response from a second party: a person does and God supplies. In the previous chapter we addressed “who” made the inquiry and “what” the main issue concerned. To clarify these passages we must now determine to what “inherit eternal life” refers. Exactly what did these two men expect from Jesus?

“Inheriting Eternal Life”

Major Issue #3

What was expected?

Entering the kingdom,
since an unbeliever

or

Inheriting rewards,
since already a believer

The combination of words, “inherit eternal life,” is used

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only four times in the New Testament. Three of those times are in reference to the rich young ruler—twice by the ruler himself (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18) and once when Christ spoke to Peter in the rich ruler passage (Matt. 19:29). The remaining occasion was by the lawyer, when he questioned Jesus (Luke 10:25). Perspective on the biblical meaning of *inheriting eternal life* can be gained from these two instances, the lawyer and the rich ruler. Therefore two New Testament concepts should be explored: (1) *inherit* and (2) *eternal life*.

Before we consider these concepts, we need to understand the biblical association between “inheriting eternal life” and “entering the kingdom.” We may consider them from three different perspectives:

*First, “inheriting eternal life” is synonymous to “entering the kingdom.”*¹ This view distinguishes entering eternal life from entering the kingdom. The kingdom is the millennial kingdom and admission is based on a believer’s good works. “Inheriting” corresponds to “reigning” with Christ in the future realm as a result of obedience.

FIRST APPROACH

Inheriting Eternal Life	=	Entering the Kingdom
Entering Eternal Life	≠	Entering the Kingdom
Salvation by Faith	=	Entering Eternal Life
Believer’s Good Works	=	Entering the Kingdom
Believer’s Good Works	=	Inheriting the Kingdom

*Second, “inheriting eternal life” differs from “entering the kingdom.”*² Entering the kingdom is equated with entering eternal life or heaven, but “inheriting” or “reigning” in the future earthly kingdom is based on intimacy in fellowship through obedience to God during the believer’s life.

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SECOND APPROACH

Inheriting Eternal Life	≠	Entering the Kingdom
Entering Eternal Life	=	Entering the Kingdom
Salvation by Faith	=	Entering Eternal Life
Salvation by Faith	=	Entering the Kingdom
Believer's Good Works	=	Inheriting the Kingdom

*Third, “entering eternal life” is synonymous to “entering the kingdom.”*³ Both of these phrases differ from *inheriting* eternal life. However, the lawyer and the ruler both misunderstood *inheriting* eternal life, thinking it meant *entering* eternal life. As J. Dwight Pentecost observes, their asking what to do to inherit eternal life “would be tantamount to asking, ‘What must I do to enter Messiah’s kingdom?’ for to a Jew entering into the kingdom and receiving eternal life were synonymous concepts.”⁴ The central issue concerns the meaning of “inherit” when spoken both by the lawyer and the rich young ruler. “Inheriting” or “reigning” in the kingdom was not the concern for either the lawyer or the rich ruler; rather their thinking

THIRD APPROACH

Usual Biblical Relationship:

Entering Eternal Life	=	Entering the Kingdom
Inheriting Eternal Life	≠	Entering Eternal Life
Inheriting Eternal Life	≠	Entering the Kingdom

Rich Ruler' Misunderstanding (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18):

Inheriting Eternal Life	=	Entering Eternal Life
Inheriting Eternal Life	=	Entering the Kingdom

Jesus' Clarification (Matt. 19:29):

Inheriting Eternal Life	=	Rewards in the Kingdom
Believer's Good Works	=	Inheriting the Kingdom

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was in line with the rabbinical teaching of that day, which taught that salvation or entering the kingdom was an earned possession.⁵ Nevertheless Jesus' one use of "inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29; also implied in Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30) properly addressed the future rewards and reign in the coming kingdom by His obedient followers.

The next chapter, "Entering the Kingdom," addresses these different approaches in detail. The key distinction regarding the interaction between Jesus and the lawyer or rich ruler centers on whether the emphasis is on the destiny of an unbeliever or the reign of an obedient believer.

"Eternal Life"

Concept

The biblical idea of eternal life is not only life that is everlasting but it is also life with Christ that begins the moment a person trusts Him as Savior. From that initial point in time, eternal life is just that, eternal. A believer will be present with the Lord forever when he dies. In the here-and-now a believer can know intimacy with Christ in his daily walk of faith, experiencing a richer and fuller life. Obedience not only has present spiritual benefits but also brings future rewards and the right to reign with Christ in His coming kingdom.

Context

The question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" was asked by both the lawyer and the rich ruler. The student of the Scriptures must ask to which aspect of eternal life did the lawyer or the ruler refer in each context: here-and-now or everlasting life in the kingdom? The context, particularly that of the rich ruler, provides perspective.

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Just prior to the rich ruler text (Luke 18:18–30), Christ had instructed His disciples not to hinder the children to come to Him, saying, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it [kingdom] *at all*” (vv. 15-17). Most conclude that what is in view here is the simple trust of a child, which is all that is necessary to enter the kingdom. Particularly this would be the case if “entering eternal life” and “entering the kingdom” are synonymous terms (see the next chapter). Even prior to this incident, Luke gives Christ’s parable of the pharisee and tax-gatherer, which contrasted faith in self-justification versus faith in being justified by God (vv. 9–14). From these contextual settings that relate to trusting in God, the rich ruler runs up to Jesus and asks, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Choices

Could it be that when Luke penned his Gospel, the parable concerning faith in God (vv. 9–14) followed by Christ’s teaching on faith of children (vv. 15–17) were to illustrate that faith results in eternal life? Could it be that the ruler was inquiring whether his eternal destiny would be secure? Particularly this would be the case if the rich ruler was confused because of the rabbinical teaching that works were required for eternal life.⁶

On the other hand, it could be assumed the rich ruler was theologically astute, understanding from Christ’s earlier teachings that salvation is a free gift. He therefore went to Jesus to confirm what good works he must do to receive rewards and reign with Christ in the coming kingdom. In this case, the “present life” of a believer is the emphasis. Nevertheless the lawyer in Luke 10 posed the identical

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question, coming to “test” Jesus. As a religious leader of the nation Israel, would his question not reflect the rabbinical teaching of that day, namely, that works are necessary to enter eternal life? If so, the rich young ruler, indoctrinated in Law-keeping, probably came to the “Good Teacher,” inquiring as to salvation, not rewards.

“Inherit”

Concept

The biblical idea of “inheriting” is typically used with kingdom, promises, or blessings and relates to each phrase: “inherit the kingdom,” “inherit the promises,” or “inherit the blessings.” To inherit

Jesus spoke of inheriting “future-life” rewards as a result of effort expended in their “present life.”

is the result of expended effort to possess or own, what is inherited.⁷

Context

“Heir” (*kleronomos*), “inheritance” (*kleeeronomia*), and “to inherit” (*kleeeronomeo*) are used in the Gospels three, four, and six times, respectively.⁸ In the Gospels, heir and inheritance are always used in reference to an inheritance of land in a family, never

the kingdom. Twice the verb “to inherit” is used by Matthew for (1) the meek who inherit the earth, found in the Beatitudes (5:5), and (2) the sheep that inherit the kingdom, found in the parable of the sheep and goats (25:34). In both instances believers are inheriting the kingdom as a result of works. The remaining four times the phrase “to inherit” is used in the Gospels (67 percent of the time) are in the rich ruler passages (Matt. 19:29; Mark 10:17; and Luke 18:18) and the lawyer passage (Luke 10:25). “To inherit” (*kleeeronomeo*)

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occurs ten additional times in the remaining New Testament books.⁹ In each of those cases the *kingdom*, the *promises*, and the *blessings* inherited are a result of effort expended, actions taken by believers to gain rewards from God.¹⁰

Choices

Understanding the relationship between “entering eternal life” and “inheriting eternal life” is at the center of this issue. Some have suggested that “inherit eternal life” *never* refers to entering heaven,¹¹ rather “inherit” *always* refers to believers inheriting rewards and reigning with Christ in the future kingdom as a result of good works. If so, the lawyer and the rich ruler would have been inquiring about the necessity of good works for the purpose of receiving rewards. In that case Christ’s response would mean that both the lawyer and the rich ruler already possessed eternal life.

While good works on the part of believers resulting in rewards could be in view and could fit the context of both the lawyer and the rich ruler, this approach has a number of problems that must be overcome. *First*, only in the lawyer and rich ruler context is “eternal life” presumably inherited (see chap. 4). *Second*, both the lawyer and the rich ruler introduced the use of the phrase “inheriting eternal life,” seemingly as unbelievers in accord with the rabbinical teaching of gaining eternal life by works of the Law (see chap. 2).

Third, Matthew used a different word “to obtain,” not “to inherit,” in the rich ruler’s initial question saying, “What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life” (Matt. 19:16). This variation in the words used brings a different perspective to the actual flow of the whole passage (vv. 16-30): first, addressing the rich ruler’s request for “obtaining eternal life” or salvation (vv. 16-22), then an interlude indicating salvation is by God alone (vv. 23-26), followed by Christ assuring Peter that obedience by those already saved produces rewards (vv. 25-29). It is in this last section of the Matthew text that Christ told His intimate followers

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that they would “inherit eternal life” (v. 29), differing from “obtain eternal life” (v. 16). Jesus spoke of inheriting “future-life” rewards as a result of effort expended in their “present life.” He encouraged believers, as Paul did as well, to “take hold of eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:12), to experience enriched life here and now in order to experience an enriched life in His presence. Notice, however, the conversation had changed from salvation with the ruler to discipleship with His disciples. Here Jesus associated “inheriting eternal life” with discipleship, not with entrance into the kingdom or salvation (see chap. 8).

The point is that it is legitimate to use “inherit” in relationship with rewards, but “inherit” is *not always* associated with rewards. “Inherit” should not be used as a club to bludgeon every other text into submission. The two times the rich ruler (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18) and the additional time the lawyer (Luke 10:25) used the expression “inherit eternal life,” their question concerned entry into eternal life or the kingdom. Nevertheless the one and only other time “inherit eternal life” is used in the New Testament was applied by Jesus in Matthew 19:29 in pointing to discipleship and future rewards. Properly used, eternal life can be understood to be earned as used in Matthew 19:29, including the parallel text of Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30, as well as in John 12:25; Romans 2:7; 6:22; Galatians 6:8.

Placing the Pieces Correctly

While eternal life is received as an everlasting gift at salvation (John 5:24), eternal life is potentially received “in the age to come” as the result of obedient, good works by those already in possession of the gift (Luke 18:30). “Possessing eternal life is one thing, but ‘taking hold’ of it is another. The former is static; the latter is dynamic. The former depends upon God; the latter depends upon us.”¹²

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Depending on one's perspective, the "inheriting eternal life" question by both the lawyer and rich ruler concerned either obtaining eternal life or earning rewards in the kingdom. Good works, in this context, are the means either for mistakenly establishing a saving relationship with God or for experiencing deeper intimacy in the Christian life. Two perspectives. Two choices. Two theological positions.

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Chapter 3, NOTES

1. The first approach is held by Gary T. Whipple, *Shock and Surprise Beyond the Rapture* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 89, 175; and Curtis H. Tucker, *Majestic Destiny* (Redmond, OR: Last Chapter, 2011), 30, 131, 270, 284.
2. The second approach is presented by Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 64-65, 99-102.
3. The third approach is the position of the present author.
4. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 299.
5. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 442; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:235; Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2007), 42; Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 64.
6. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 442; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 342; Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, 42; Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 64.
7. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 64, 68.
8. *Ibid.*, 63-64.
9. The ten additional instances are 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; Hebrews 1:4, 14; 6:12; 12:17; 1 Peter 3:9; and Revelation 21:7.
10. “Inheriting the kingdom” texts that cause interpretation difficulties are 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; and Ephesians 5:5. In each case forfeiture of rewards are the issue, not “entering the kingdom,” referring to eternal life (see chap. 4). *Entering* the kingdom is by faith alone, while *inheriting* the kingdom concerns obedience to God’s Word and rewards.
11. The lawyer (Luke 10) and the rich ruler (Luke 18) both misunderstood *inheriting* eternal life, thinking it meant *entering* eternal life.
12. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 137.