

When I was a teenager my mother used to say to me, “I wish I didn’t have to tell you to empty the dishwasher. I wish you would empty it because you wanted to. I wish you would see that it needs to be done, and would do it without me asking.”

And I remember thinking at the time, that is not a wish that I can grant. That is not something that I’m ever going to really want to do. I didn’t even think about the dishwasher from moment to moment unless my mom were to bring it up. I would certainly empty it if asked, because I was a reasonably obedient daughter. But remember to do it, want to do it? That seemed to be asking a lot.

Now that I am a mother of grown kids, I can see where my mom’s wish was coming from. I have my own dishwasher now, and the reality is that if I don’t empty it, the dirty dishes will pile up on the sink, and there is no place to make dinner, and you get ants. Those were not things that I understood when I was a teenager. And do understand them now.

This is what comes to mind when I think of the rich young man asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. I can hear myself saying “Hey Mom, what must I do to get out of the house this evening?

And I can hear her saying, “Have you emptied the dishwasher?”

And then, “I wish I didn’t have to ask you to do it. I wish you had just taken care of it. Then we wouldn’t be having this conversation at all.”

What was the rich young man asking of Jesus when he knelt before him, his mouth full of flattery, and asked what he needed to do to have eternal life?

Well first let’s clarify what he was not asking about. He was not asking how to get into heaven.¹ His request for eternal life was a way of inquiring about the Messianic age to come, which would replace the current age in this world. This new age had long been hoped for in Israel. It was the time when the representative of God would arrive – maybe a new King like David, or a prophet, a messiah or anointed one – and overthrow the evil Empires of the current sinful age – like Ceasar for example. Then the Messiah would usher in the “new age” when God is king of this world.

N.T. Wright describes it as a time of “justice and peace, freedom for Israel, punishment for evildoers (whether Jews or Gentiles), a time of prosperity when all the prophecies would be fulfilled, all the righteous dead would be raised to new life, all the world would burst out into a new and endless spring.”²

So sinful and false leaders like Ceasar would be tossed out. The righteous one of God’s people would stay. And there would a great reversal of people’s conditions – the lame would walk, the blind

¹ Wright, N. T.. Mark for Everyone (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 135). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

² Wright, (p. 134).

see, the poor would have what they need. You can hear that promise and hope echo in Isaiah and in the Christian Scriptures like the Magnificat, in the Beatitudes, in the miracles of Jesus....³

So our rich young man was asking about the age to come that Jesus in his Messianic acts might very well usher in, and he was wondering how he might fare in it. Would he get to enjoy its blessings? Surely his wealth would give him a foot up, as many believed that wealth meant God was already smiling on you.

In response Jesus inquired about how well he followed the commandments; note, Jesus doesn't list all of them, just the ones that have to do with how well he treated other people. The basics, really. And by the young man's account, ever since he was young he had not murdered anyone, slept with someone else's spouse, stolen anything, lied or ripped anyone off. And he obeyed his parents.

So basically, he hadn't been a jerk. This doesn't sound like big time righteousness to me. He must have been pretty hopeful when Jesus inquired about this list. Jesus may as well have asked him if he had emptied the dishwasher.

But here comes the real test. Jesus looked at this rich young man with love, the love that his Abba has for his children, the love that was bringing on the new age of God's reign even as they spoke. Jesus looked at him with love and said: there is just one thing you lack.

Gulp.

What the rich young man lacked was ... nothing. By that I mean the nothing that would remain if he were to empty his life of everything that made up his identity -- his wealth, his status, his check list of righteous acts-- and follow Jesus into the new age holding onto absolutely nothing. Empty hands. No attachments. Nothing to lose. Possessing only faith in this Jesus who would show him how to look at others with the love of his Abba.

And this was not like anything that this rich young man, this really good boy, had ever imagined. Because it probably always seemed like if you followed the rules, and behaved yourself, and weren't a total jerk you'd earn God's love, you'd guarantee your inheritance in the age to come.

In that sense the covenant with God was less a shared promise than a contractual relationship, full of bargaining, barter, exchange. And it's not surprising that the rich young man thought that, because that is absolutely the currency of the present age. Follow these rules, this formula, and you'll get your reward from God, who is keeping track in the Book of Life.

But what if Jesus were changing the story with a new covenantal way? Love God and love people and the idea of a set of rules against being a jerk won't even be necessary.

You'll empty the dishwasher without being asked, because it needs to be done for the good of all. Or better yet, you'll give your wealth away because others need it more. You'll see to the needs of your fellow humans for food or housing or companionship because you don't want them to suffer. You will speak up for justice because you don't want people to be mistreated or oppressed or

³ See also a discussion in how the Qumran Scrolls reflect the Messianic expectation of Jesus in Amy-Jill Levine; Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (p. 712). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

denied their dignity as children of God. You will share the Good News of a loving God because that's the source of all this love. And your family won't be limited to the people you are related to, but will have lots of parents, and siblings, and homes to stay in because love like this creates communities of faith, it builds churches of living stone.

I think Jesus is telling the rich young man – and his apostles, and us - to get busy with this, and you might be surprised to discover that the new age is already breaking into the present one, you're already living in it.

Why is it so hard for everyone to enter the Kingdom of God? Maybe it's not something that we enter on our own steam, or that we earn, or talk our way into. Maybe **it enters us** by the love and grace of God, who makes all things possible – especially the Kingdom.

Peter and the other disciple had given up everything at Jesus' request to follow him, but their sacrifice wasn't a prerequisite to enter the Kingdom of God, it was what life in the Kingdom of God entails. What such a life fosters is beloved community of God.

Which sounds great until Jesus adds "with persecution." Because in the current age, there would be push back from the empires of that age, there would be a cost to discipleship, not collected by God but exacted by other powers. And there still is.

I believe we are still in this time of overlapping ages, where the Messianic age – the age of God's reign– breaks into our world to the extent that we allow it to break into us, to the extent that we follow Jesus' Word and his Example. The death and resurrection of Jesus have made this possible, ongoing, real from his time to this time.

And the real question that Jesus is asking us is this – whose Kingdom do you choose to carry within you? The Kingdoms of the current age, or the Kingdom of God?

Our answer to that is the difference between going sad away or walking through life with Joy.

Amen.

