

CHAPTER IV

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

The key question is that put to Jesus by a certain rich man: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17)?” I designate this the key because it focuses directly on what is, I believe, the single most fundamental aspiration of almost all human beings – the desire to live forever. The corollary to this deep-seated desire is, of course, the fear of death. In consequence, men and women do everything possible to extend their lives in this world. Few they are who firmly assert, “It is time for me to go.” And when one does so speak, the lifelong society will not accommodate him. The huge amounts of effort, talent, money, and time invested in the medical industry worldwide with the stated aim of prolonging life testifies to human devotion to the quest of eternal life. Hospitals and nursing facilities crowded with terminally ill patients or incapacitated elderly patients testify to the quest. The vast investitures in pharmaceuticals and medical research testify to the quest. A legal system that protects and preserves life under any and all circumstances testifies to the quest.

It is this quest for eternal life that has made Christianity so attractive to billions of people around the globe because, from the beginning, Jesus has promised eternal life to his followers.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand (John 10:27,28).

The question as to what we must do to obtain this gift is therefore of prime importance, and its answer, when truly stated, must be among the most important bits of information ever dispensed. Therefore the question put to Jesus by this rich man opens a topic of supreme interest. Jesus answered this question rather straightforwardly. Paul dispensed his own answer and here we examine the two and make comparisons.

Eternal Life According to Jesus

The first thing to consider is how Jesus would have men deal with their sins. When a sinner comes to Jesus, he or she has a heavy burden indeed, and it is not reasonable to think that one can take up the promise of eternal life without first doing something about that burden that translates into guilt, remorse, lack of self respect and indebtedness. What must one do to compensate for that past life of waywardness?

Repenting

Jesus' first word to sinners is, “Repent.”

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:14,15).

We will deal with the “believe” portion of this injunction later. For now, let us concentrate on the repentance. Luke has him say,

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32).

So, whatever more Jesus may have said about qualifying for eternal life, the first word is, repent! One of his stated reasons for coming into the world was to call sinners to repentance. Many of us will know that the New Testament Greek from which this word comes is *metánoia*, to change one's mind. This is its definition here and it implies more than simply changing one's mind about a particular matter. It means to change one's whole way of thinking, or to change from an old mind to a new mind. But what we need here is not a definition. We need an example.

Jesus provided this very thing in his Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal, in the far country, had his mind set on the lusts and pleasures of that country. He repented when he turned his mind to life in the Father's house and thus he changed his mind in the most radical way. This change of mind, born of absolutely nothing but misery and the bankruptcy of his life in the far country led immediately to a course of action. He said to himself, I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants." Thus he repented, and we see that his repentance led immediately to a first course of action that can only be called "confession." Genuine repentance of sin always leads to the confession of the sin to the one against whom the sin was committed. In this case, it was the father of the Prodigal who represents the Father in heaven. The immediate result is acceptance and great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7).

Confessing

This confession of our sins that accompanies repentance is one of the two kinds of confession that are essential to our acceptance by Jesus so as to inherit eternal life. The other is the confession of Jesus before men, as Lord and Savior. Jesus said it this way:

So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 10:32,33).

The Greek for "acknowledge" is *òmologéo*, "to speak the same thing." It is translated "confess" in the Authorized Version and its significance is clear. It is to publicly acknowledge that one is a disciple of Jesus, speaking the same thing as Jesus, with Jesus being one's Lord, Teacher, and Leader. When we do this before men, Jesus will acknowledge us before the Father; otherwise he will deny us. Obviously this bears directly on our inheritance of eternal life, and it must be included here.

If we take this seriously, we must conclude that there will be no secret disciples of Jesus in heaven. This is obviously distinct from confessing, or acknowledging our sins before the Father, so that two kinds of confession must be considered in the prescription for eternal life. We see the significance of this when we look at the early Roman persecution of Christians. In some cases those who denied Christ, or denied that they were Christians, were released unharmed, whereas on the same day and before the same judge, one who refused to deny him but rather confessed himself to be a Christian was delivered up to death. Our primary calling on the earth, after all, is to be his witnesses. This becomes impossible if we deny him before men. We also see its relevance to the Great Principle, since one who loves his life on earth will deny Jesus to save it, whereas one who loves the Father with all he has and is will gladly confess Jesus so as to go to him! The two confessions, put even more briefly, are:

- Confession of our sins before God, and
- Confession of Jesus Christ before men. Both are essential.

PAUL: THE STRANGER

Obeying

Jesus next leads us directly to a consideration of the commandments. He makes one of the most direct and positive assertions of the answer to our question in Matthew 19:17:

If you would enter life, keep the commandments.

There were, and are, many commandments so the interrogator responded, "Which?" Then Jesus answered,

You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

All but the last of these are drawn directly from the Decalogue, being the recitation of Commandments V-IX. The last, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, is drawn from Leviticus 19:18, and is the commandment that Jesus elsewhere paired with the Great Commandment (to love God) as the summation of all the Law and the Prophets. The parallel accounts from Luke and Mark do not bring this one forward, and it is doubtful that Jesus actually specified it here because it is a kind of summation of the others (V-IX), that regulate our actions with regard to our neighbors.

Forsaking

The man interrupted at this point to say, "All these I have observed; what do I still lack" (Matthew 19:20)? Or, as Mark and Luke have it, Jesus himself said,

You lack one thing: go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me (Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22).

The man then went away sorrowfully, for he was very rich. Then Jesus announced to this disciples, who were present and overheard the transaction,

Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:23, cf. Mark 10:23, Luke 18:24).

Then Jesus advanced the famous metaphor of the camel going through the eye of a needle and the disciples, astonished no doubt, urgently petitioned, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus replied, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

His disciples, hearing this hard language, were plunged into a crisis of self concern, each wondering where he or she stood in this scheme of things. Peter was prompted to say, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you; what then shall we have?" Jesus answered in words that should have been comforting to them:

Truly, I say to you, when the son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one who has left houses or brother or sister or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundred fold, and inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:28,29).

His concluding words reveal that he is more fully answering the rich man's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" So, this whole transaction is devoted to that question, and the answer given is adequate for that situation.

Do we need to elucidate so simple an answer? No; nevertheless we can bring more light to bear by examining the similar incident recorded only by Luke. This time, a lawyer puts him to the test by saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus then put the question back to

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

him saying,

What is written in the law? How do you read (Luke 10:26).

The lawyer replied immediately, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as your self." Then he said to him,

You have answered right; do this, and you will live.

The answer affirmed by Jesus here is precisely the same as that supplied to the rich man. In both cases, the keeping of the commandments is the key to eternal life, and the same commandments are brought to bear. When he told the rich man to obey Commandments V-IX of the Decalogue, he was telling him he must love his neighbor as himself, for these commands cover special cases regulating his actions toward his neighbors. By keeping them, he loves his neighbor as himself. This is the Second of the two Great Commandments stated by Jesus in answer to the question, "Which is the great commandment in the law. What he said was,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

But how does the First and Great Commandment enter into his response to the rich man? After he had faithfully loved his neighbor as himself, he yet lacked something. He knew this and acknowledged the same by saying to Jesus, "What lack I yet?" Then Jesus told him to sell all that he had, give it to the poor and "Come, follow me." This the man could not do because he loved his wealth more than he loved God, so his failure was in not keeping the First and Great Commandment. Furthermore, he did not really love his neighbor as himself. If he had, he would gladly have shared his wealth with the poor. But the bottom line, the one thing keeping him from inheriting eternal life was his failure to keep the First and Great Commandment. He did not love the Lord his God with his entire mind, with all his soul, with all his heart and with all his strength. Had he loved God after this fashion, he would gladly have given his wealth to the poor so as to go to the Father in the embrace of life eternal.

Following

We could easily overlook a third essential specified in Jesus' response to the rich man. It is that last admonition, "Come, follow me." This "follow me" is the single admonition that sums all things in two little words. Peter and the other disciples qualified if they had "left everything and followed you" as Peter professed. Jesus' response to Peter reveals that what must be left in order to follow Jesus is not only wealth, as with the rich man, but also house and family. This is the sufficient key to eternal life as stated in John 10:27, quoted above. (My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give to them eternal life, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.) The full significance of the "Follow me" admonition is revealed in John 12:25,26:

He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him.

These words were stated by Jesus as he was about to go to the cross, thus revealing to us what one must do to "follow Jesus." As he stated elsewhere, Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me (follow me) cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:27). Keeping the First and Great Commandment is therefore equivalent to hating one's life in this world for the sake of life eternal. To receive eternal life, one must love God and his Son Jesus, so that one is ready and willing to

PAUL: THE STRANGER

leave everything, including one's family and one's life in this world, to follow Jesus to the Father's house. That is the significance of bearing one's own cross and following him. That is the Great Principle to which we must conform if we are to possess eternal life.

Believing

A second set of Jesus' sayings uses yet different language in the prescription for eternal life. Here are some examples of these:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him (John 3:36).

For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).

These utterances state that one receives eternal life through the single qualification of believing in Jesus. This is a universal prescription that prevails throughout Christendom. One does not attend churches long until he has heard it and had it reinforced in many ways. But the following utterances give light on what Jesus mean to communicate with this prescription.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

For I have not spoken on my own authority; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden me (John 12:49,50).

I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word. Now they know everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know that in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me (John 17:6-8).

Jesus here attributes the words that he uttered to God the Father so that he, who hears and believes, believes the Father who sent him. He who believes, like his closest disciples, also believes that the Father sent Jesus the Son and therefore believes in Jesus as the legitimate, authorized conveyor of the message of God. This is what Jesus means us to understand when he speaks of believing in him so as to receive eternal life. If we believe that Jesus came from the Father, and that his words are the words of the Father, we will believe the words and respond to them so as to inherit eternal life. As Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

To believe in Jesus means, to Jesus, that we receive his words and, believing that they came from the Father as Jesus asserted, we believe them and act upon them, thus receiving eternal life. For example, consider the Great Principle of John 12:25: "He who loves his life loses it, but he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." If we believe in Jesus, we believe the Father sent him with these words to utter, and we believe the words, understanding that they came from the Father. We therefore believe that we must hate life in this world if we are to inherit life eternal, and that if we love life, we will lose it. When we respond to this principle by hating our lives in this world after the example of Jesus who uttered the words, we receive eternal life.

If, ignoring these words from the Father spoken by him, we cling to the love of life and count it

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

righteousness we will not receive eternal life. Otherwise we are dead, regardless of what we may profess about this matter of believing in Jesus. It is the word of the Father spoken through Jesus. This understanding is fully affirmed by the strange Eucharistic sounding passage in John 6. After affirming that he is the bread of life that came down from heaven, according to the pattern of the manna that nourished the Hebrews in the wilderness, he identified the “bread, which I shall give for the life of the world” as “my flesh.” Then he continued,

. . . he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:54).

This saying shocked his disciples, and he immediately explained to them:

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63).

Another way of saying the same thing is to assert that one receives eternal life by eating the words of Jesus – that is, by receiving them, believing them (believing in Jesus) and conforming to them. So again, believing in Jesus is the same as believing the words that I have spoken to you, accepting that the words came from the Father and that Jesus is the only authorized messenger of God to men. The words he uttered, and only the words uttered by him, are the words of eternal life.

Even the words of the Old Testament are not the words of eternal life. Only the sayings of Jesus are the words of eternal life; all others are excluded, although they may be witnesses to those words. Thus Jesus spoke to the Jews:

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to me that you may have life (John 5:39,40).

So, when we hear Jesus saying, No one comes to the Father but by me (John 14:6), we hear him saying words of the Father, and when we believe in Jesus, we believe the words and accept Jesus as The Father's sole authorized messenger. Jesus, and Jesus only, has the words of eternal life.

Summation

What, then, according to Jesus, must one do to inherit eternal life? It can all be summed as follows:

- 1. Repent and confess your sins.
- 2. Confess Jesus before men.
- 3. Obey. Keep the commandments. Keep the Second Commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself. Keep the First and Great Commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your mind, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, for on these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. This is equivalent to the Great Principle of John 12:25.
- 4. Forsake wealth and other worldly attachments.
- 5. Follow Jesus by taking up one's own cross. This is the sum of the above.
- 6. Believe in Jesus by receiving and believing his words. This is the sum of all the above.

PAUL: THE STRANGER

Or, we can sum it even more crisply by referring to Jesus' immediate response to the rich man:

If you would enter life, keep the commandments (Matthew 19:17).

This is Jesus' prescription for eternal life. What does Paul say?

Eternal Life According to Paul

The early chapters of Romans set forth Paul's prescription for eternal life in a tortuous exposition of his gospel. Searching it out can be tricky as indicated by comparing the following statements from his pen:

For he (God) will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those

who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (Romans 2:7,8).

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Romans 2:13).

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Romans 4:20).

The first two texts, Romans 2:7,8 and 13, are in complete harmony with the prescription given by Jesus when he said, If you would enter into life, keep the commandments (Matthew 19:17). But Romans 4:20 seems a direct contradiction of both Jesus and Paul's own statement in 2:13. To explain this contradiction we will need to conduct a brief survey of the first chapters of Romans.

After the usual introduction, he briefly alludes to his gospel in 1:16f:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

This introduces the concept of gaining salvation, or eternal life, by faith and, as we will see, this conception as Paul defines it absolutely rules out any contribution by works to the prescription for eternal life.

Recall now that what Jesus said is, "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments." But what Paul wrote is: "He who through faith is righteous shall live." But now he switches our attention to the wrath of God in v.18 and explains that "men" are without excuse for their wickedness and that therefore God gave them up. This "God gave them up" theme is repeated three times for emphasis and concludes with an exhaustive listing of the wickedness of men. Paul intends for this indictment of "men" to be universal, and he lays the groundwork in the early verses of Chapter 2, where he attacks those who consider themselves righteous while judging others.

. . . in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Those who judge others are guilty of the same wickedness; therefore all are guilty. Nevertheless, he is not ready to set them aside completely, so he gives the description of the Judgment that provides for both categories, the righteous and the wicked, and establishes the justification of the righteous through works of law. Then, beginning with 2:12, he specifies that the Gentiles are also

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

included on substantially the same basis as the Jews, for the same law binds them, even though they do not have the law. Nevertheless, when they do what the law requires, they show that the law is written on their hearts (2:15).

Then he switches his attention again to the Jews (2:17) who know the law, and indicts them for not obeying it even while they pass judgment on the evil deeds of the Gentiles who have not the law. He warns the Jews that their circumcision is of no value when they break the law and then proceeds to define a "real Jew" as one whose circumcision is inward, of the heart, spiritual and not literal (2:29).

Beginning with 3:1, he notes advantages of the Jew and then explains how they have wasted their advantage so that, when we come to 3:9, we have the point that Paul was really getting at all along:

What, then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written, "There is none righteous, no, not one . . ."

Only now can we begin to realize the development of his theme. His earlier description of the Judgment in which God will render to every man according to his works such that "to those who by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life (2:6,7)," must be true in principle only. In practice, absolutely no one thus qualifies for eternal life ("by patience in well doing") because "None is righteous, no, not one . . ." Then he concludes with the words listed above (3:20),

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The contradiction between this and 2:13 is therefore reconciled. 2:13 is true in principle, whereas in practice 3:20 rules because there is, in fact, no human being who does good – no, not one (3:10). It must follow therefore that no one, Jew or Gentile, can obtain eternal life by works of law even though this is in principle the only way.

Faith

Nevertheless, there is hope. At 3:21 he changes gears again and states the essence of his gospel.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith (3:21-25).

Then in 3:28:

For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.

Justification by faith is therefore Paul's prescription for eternal life. God put Jesus forward to shed his blood on the cross as an expiation of our sins, and all that he requires of us is that we believe that

Christ died for our sins, according to the scripture (I Corinthians 15:3).

It is a "free gift" that we can do nothing to earn, therefore it is not of works but must be

PAUL: THE STRANGER

appropriated simply by believing. How are we to explain the free gift? Does God wink at sin, view it lightly? No, he views it with the utmost seriousness, such that there is no forgiveness except by the shedding of blood. Jesus has therefore shed his blood for us, thus “expiating” our sins, if only we will place our faith in him. Paul attributes this putting forward of Jesus to shed his blood in expiation of our sins to God’s grace. In Adam, sin reigned in death, but in Jesus Christ grace reigns

through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:21).

Faith in response to grace is therefore Paul’s prescription for eternal life. This is the premise on which all of evangelical Christianity takes its stand. Eternal life is an absolutely free gift:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

Being saved, justified, having salvation and receiving eternal life are expressions that focus on different aspects of the same experience. It requires faith and faith only.

Confession

But Paul doubtless knew that Jesus had taught that one must confess faith in him before men (Matthew 10:32). Therefore confession enters into the equation. Paul wraps it all up nicely in Romans 10:9f:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

It is to this formula that I subscribed when first I came to Christ.

But what about sin? Will we not continue to disobey the law in spite of everything? Does this matter when we “are not under law, but under grace?” Or, as Paul asks in Romans 6:1,

Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!

Then he brings forward baptism as the explanation of the new power that believers have to overcome sin. The old, sinful man died and was buried with Christ in baptism so that the new man might be raised with him in newness of life. “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.”

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Under these circumstances and by the miraculous power of God in Christ, the righteous works of Jesus are imputed to the sinner.

Righteousness of Christ

The result is that the sinner is to be judged for eternal life, not on the basis of his own works, but by the righteous deeds of Jesus. Seeing that the righteous deeds of Jesus are imputed to him, he has confidence that the blessed eternal glory of Jesus is also his for eternal life and that he will stand approved on the Day of Judgment. The formula of Romans 2:6,7 above, that holds in principle, therefore applies ultimately also in practice because the sinner is judged to have upheld the Law and is to be judged not by his own works, but by the righteous works of Jesus. The work of Christ was

. . . in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4).

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

The sinner has therefore “put on Christ” (Romans 13:14; See also Galatians 3:27).

Why the Contradictions?

On the surface this is a powerful gospel that provides eternal life as a free gift while simultaneously promising the ability to live a new life in Christ. Since its focus is on Jesus and his cross and resurrection the churchmen have assumed through the centuries, without question, that it is the same prescription offered by Jesus himself. But the prescription of Jesus for eternal life as described above knows nothing of this “free gift” righteousness by faith apart from works of law. How can we explain the contradiction?

We cannot explain it by supposing that Jesus laid the foundation for Paul to later build upon, because the two are contradictory and therefore incompatible. Besides this, Paul specified the foundation to be the apostles and prophets, with Jesus being, not the foundation, but the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

Did Jesus intend to lay down what was true in principle and defer to Paul to lay down what was necessary in practice? No, for Jesus clearly indicated that he had revealed “all that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15) and that his word would endure though heaven and earth pass away (Matthew 24:35). If his word endures though all else passes away, it must be the last and enduring word, requiring no additions or corrections. Again, Jesus once told his disciples,

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . (John 16: 12,13).

Can this be the explanation? Again, no, for what Paul came teaching, the free gift of grace, was, and is, much easier to bear than what Jesus, with his Great Principle, left us. Furthermore, Jesus indicated that it is the Spirit of truth who would “guide you into all the truth”, without any suggestion that the Spirit would require an intermediary such as Paul. We must look for some other explanation.

If we cannot find an explanation by looking to Jesus, we must look to Paul. Indeed, it is there that we will find it when we discover his many errors. Some of these errors have already been defined in our previous discussion of Paul, but they must be listed here again as the explanation of the disparity between the prescriptions for eternal life of Jesus and Paul. His primary errors appear to be those of interpretation of scripture. They raise the interesting question, “Did he err because of the way he interpreted scripture, or did he err for other reasons then misinterpret the scripture to make it appear to support his error?”

I think we must apply the latter of these explanations, because he would himself refuse to accept that his gospel came to him through the study of scripture. No, he consistently attributed his gospel to direct revelations from the Lord himself, without any intermediary, such as the Law and the Prophets that comprise the scriptures. Therefore he must have approached the scriptures with a gospel delivered, as he believed, by the Lord. Since he believed the scriptures bear witness to his gospel (Romans 3:21), he would then have searched the scriptures to gain scriptural support for the gospel already formed in his mind. Such support would greatly strengthen his presentation and provide a second witness, thus confirming his gospel. Let us now examine the nature of this support.

His gospel stands ultimately on one fundamental assertion, “We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Romans 3:28). Being justified means that one is accounted righteous so as to qualify for eternal life, and it is dependent only on faith accompanied by confession of Jesus as Lord. This faith is the act of believing as Paul has spelled it out in Romans 10:9,10:

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised

PAUL: THE STRANGER

him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.

To get a witness from the Law and the Prophets he went first to Habakkuk and quoted him as follows:

He who through faith is righteous shall live (Romans 1:17, Habakkuk 2:4).

That this is the fundamental text in his mind is suggested by the fact that it is the first one on which he alights, and he quotes it very early in his presentation. Everything he writes thereafter is founded on it. But as I have shown above, he has radically misunderstood this text. Read in its context, translated according to the best lexicons and compared with its usage in other places where it is found in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word he translates to read "faith" (*emunah*) means something else altogether, namely, "faithfulness." Now, faithfulness means steadfastness, firmness, and stability. Habakkuk uses it to describe one who does not fail to continue waiting for the fulfillment of a promised "vision." It has no essential relationship to the contents of the vision, or what the faithful waiter believes. It applies only to his steadfastness in the course of waiting. He doesn't give up, though the wait is a long one. He is faithful. "Faith" is a substantive that indicates what one believes, whereas "faithful" is an adjective that describes how tenaciously one holds to it. One could believe anything and be faithful if he held faithfully to it, but this surely isn't what Paul meant to be saying, for whom a very specific belief about Christ was the sole key to salvation and eternal life. Paul failed to see this distinction, probably because he used the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in common use in his time, which does not make a distinction. He believed that the righteous shall live by his faith. But he chose a text that says, "The righteous shall live by his faithfulness."

Next, Paul needed an example from the Old Testament to illustrate his case and to explain certain aspects of it, such as his stance toward the law. For this he chose Abraham and pounced on his transaction with God as described in Genesis 15:1-6. There, God assured Abraham that he would yet have offspring. "Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then Abraham "believed the Lord, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." From this Paul argued that Abraham was the first to be "accounted righteous" on the basis of pure faith, or simply by believing the Lord, and that now, by believing something else, that Christ was raised from the dead, one can likewise be accounted righteous.

There are two difficulties with this. In the first place, according to Paul this is the end of the matter but this did not settle things with God for Abraham. Later, we read that "After these things God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). If God already counted him righteous, in the final sense as Paul understood it, there would have been no need for further testing. Nevertheless God found it necessary to put him to a test by commanding him to offer up his son Isaac on an altar. It was only after Abraham passed this test that God then spoke to him and said,

By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, **because you have obeyed my voice** (Genesis 22:15-18)..

Surely, if God had counted Abraham righteous as Paul conceived it, these promises would have come to him without the test. This reveals that God did not finally account Abraham as righteous until after the test, for he would not have made the promise unless Abraham passed it. And God has here stated why the promise was finally given: "because you have obeyed my voice." The patriarch was therefore justified and blessed because he had obeyed a law of God. But this is precisely contrary to Paul, who asserted, "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

Now, the order of events is extremely important here, for Paul uses it to establish the idea of righteousness apart from law by pointing out that it was before he was circumcised that Abraham was accounted righteous (Romans 4: 10). But this final test of righteousness did not come until after Abraham was circumcised! Paul fails again to prove that Abraham was reckoned righteous on the basis of faith alone, apart from works of law.

The second difficulty with Paul's argument is that James, the Lord's brother, flatly contradicted it!

Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness; and he was called the friend of God." You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:20-24).

On the other hand, Jesus' view that one enters into life by keeping the commandments accords fully with the above Old Testament texts, selected by Paul himself, as well as with the text from James.

Paul's conviction that all men, both Jews and Gentiles, are under the power of sin was fundamental to his doctrine. This seemed evident to him, and it meant that the law was unable to produce a single righteous man. If a man could obey the law perfectly, he would be without sin and could be declared righteous on the basis of his works. He used himself as an example of the impossibility of obeying the law by describing how he had been unable to deal with his covetousness (Romans 7:7f). He explained how his carnal nature had prevented his obeying the Tenth Commandment. Rather than make him a righteous man through keeping this law, it only revealed to him his own covetousness. "The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me." (Romans 7:10)

But he needed scriptural support for this also, and he gave a lot of it in 3:9-19. I have shown above how the seven texts he brings forward here to certify his assertion that all men are, without exception, under the power of sin are ill conceived. In every case the contexts of the selected texts reveals that their authors had a place for the existence of righteous men along with the sinful ones. His use of the scriptures here is fatally flawed. It does not at all witness to his gospel.

Paul is in these texts seeking to justify his assertion that man is justified by faith alone apart from works of the law. We should pause here to consider that he is attempting by any means to contradict the simple doctrine of Jesus, "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments." I do not object to the idea that Jesus' doctrine is only true in principle and that in practice something more is required to qualify one for eternal life. That this something more is faith as Paul conceived it is yet to be established, for Paul certainly fails to do so. Nevertheless, one of the very texts that Paul selected as testimony to his doctrine clearly identifies this "something else." So here we bring forward yet another of his errors.

Paul next brings the great King David to the dock to witness for his gospel. "So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works." Then he refers us to Psalm 32:1,2:

Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin.

This text struck Paul as being extremely appropriate and directly applicable to his theses of justification by faith. He has just written, "And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his **faith is reckoned as righteousness.**" When David writes of one who is blessed by having sins covered so that the Lord does not reckon his sins against him, it must be

PAUL: THE STRANGER

because of his faith. But when we look at the Psalm to see precisely what was in David's mind when he wrote these words, we find he was responding to a blessed personal experience that had no reference to his believing a particular creed. He first writes of his great unhappiness, his "groaning all day long," when the hand of the Lord was "heavy upon him" and "my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3, 4). Then he tried something different: "I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgression to the Lord; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin'" (v.5). This confession was what produced David's great blessing of forgiven transgression, or covered sin. There is no reference in this Psalm to justification by faith or to subscription to any article of faith, but only the counsel to confess one's iniquities to the Lord. That is what produced David's forgiveness and the great blessing of forgiven transgression.

This can be brought forward to support Jesus' teaching to ask the Lord's forgiveness for our sins (The Lord's Prayer), and he promised that our sins would be forgiven in that case, provided only we also forgive others when they offend us (Matthew 6:12). But it cannot reasonably be cited in support of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith only, as he does here. Why did he do it? It must have been because of the similarity of language, including the word, "reckon." David spoke of being blessed because the Lord does not reckon his sin, which sounds at first hearing much like the "man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works" (4:6).

The "something more" mentioned above is, of course, God's promise to forgive our sins when we confess them, as David did in Psalm 32, and provided only that we also forgive others who sin against, or offend us. This is the first ingredient in Jesus' prescription for eternal life as specified above. Divine forgiveness following repentance and confession is an ingredient missing from Paul's gospel. He really does not know anything about this feature of the divine character, of forgiveness following confession. In this letter to the Romans, where he unveils the essence of his gospel, he does not mention divine forgiveness apart from this one misquoted reference from the Psalms. In other letters he barely mentions it, and bases it solely on the confession of faith in Christ. He does not base it on the confession of sins to the Father.

Though we can find little evidence for Paul's incorporation of repentance in his prescription for eternal life in Romans, Luke in the Acts quotes him as finding a place for it. He has Paul preaching the gospel at Athens and saying,

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30; see also 26:20, 19:4, and 20:21).

It may very well be that Paul used such language. But from the evidence in Romans that testifies to the absence of this concept from his gospel, he must have used it simply because it was religious lingo that carried no special significance. The verb, "repent" does not appear in Romans; it plays no part in Paul's exposition of his view of salvation. The substantive, "repentance" appears in Romans only once (2:4).

Repentance and confession of sin clearly played no significant part in Paul's personal religious experience. There are two witnesses to his "conversion" in the New Testament. One is by Luke in Acts 9, and Paul has a veiled reference to it in Galatians (1:11-17). In neither is there the faintest implication of remorse or guilt on the part of the sinner. There is no confession of sin, no indication that he recognized his actions as sinful. He even boasts of his zeal for the traditions of his fathers. One day he was intent on destroying the flock of God. Then the Lord struck him blind, and three days later he was zealously building it up! There is not even a hint of repentance and confession of his sins to God the Father.

He liked to appeal to David as a witness to his gospel. It is a pity he was so blind to the true testimony of David, whose repentance and confession before God were stated in the most vivid language to be found anywhere. Typical is this:

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou are justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment (Psalm 51:1-4).

There is no evidence to suggest that Paul ever thus repented and confessed his sins to God.

I believe we can explain this omission when we examine his reference to his own sinfulness in Romans 7. There he points specifically to his struggle with the sin of covetousness as forbidden by the Tenth Commandment. He has just asked the question,

What shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

Now he does something that is disastrous to his gospel, but it is so very easy to overlook. He gives "sin" a personality, one with will and motive and evil intent.

But Sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness.

I capitalize the word in this context, to indicate his imputation to Sin of a personality and individuality of its own.

Apart from the law, Sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, Sin revived and I died.

Note that Sin is distinct from Paul, and see how their conditions alternate. When Sin was dead, Paul was alive; when Sin came to life, Paul died. Sin, this devil-person, found an opening through the commandment and deceived Paul, then killed him! Note here that Paul himself is not complicit. This perverse, independent personality, Sin, made him do it. It gets worse. It was not the law that killed him. The law is still good.

It was Sin, working death in me through what is good in order that Sin might be shown to be sin and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

Now he advances an excuse for his actions by taking refuge in the fact that "I am carnal." "I do not even understand my own actions." If he doesn't understand them, how can he be complicit? Now we come to his great evasion! It is pure genius! Listen:

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now, if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but Sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but Sin which dwells within me.

Then he goes on to say,

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of Sin which dwells in my members.

Now we know why Paul never repented of sin, and never confessed his sins. He had none. When he did evil things, it was not him that did them, but this invention of his, this Sin-person who inhabited his flesh and imprisoned his mind so that he was helpless to control his actions. He

PAUL: THE STRANGER

was not a sinner – he was the victim of Sin!

There may have been times in his ministry when he acknowledged sin, moments when he was not challenged but could share his inmost being with a dear friend. One example of this is his confession to Timothy,

I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (I Timothy 1:12-16)

When we see Paul repeatedly using the scriptures in this deceptive way, we cannot but conclude that the Law and the Prophets in fact do not witness to his gospel as he asserted. But how could he get away with this? Wouldn't his error be evident to those to whom he wrote?

No, his errors would be rather neatly concealed. Remember that Paul was aiming his message primarily to Gentiles who had little or no knowledge of Hebrew scriptures, and even his Jewish disciples would not likely have at their disposal a copy of the scriptures by which to check his message. He blended the text into his message so as to make it appear to be very relevant. They felt no need to question his sources. Furthermore, he was so thoroughly convinced of the validity of his message that he was himself most likely blind to the true import of the scriptures he cited. The same can be said for the churchmen of today who firmly believe Paul and hold to the integrity of his message even though his shortcomings are obvious to an honest and critical mind.

Summation

We can summarize Paul's prescription for eternal life somewhat as follows:

- 1. Confession: Confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9).
- 2. Faith: Believe in your heart that God raised him from the Dead (Romans 10:9).

This two-part prescription is based on the following presumptions:

- 1. It is the doers of the law who will be justified (Romans 2: 13).
- 2. There is none righteous, no, not one (Romans 3:10). No one does the law.
- 3. Therefore, the works of the law will justify no human being (Romans 3:20). Therefore (1) is of no effect.
- 4. But now the righteousness of God, which is the righteousness of Christ, has been manifested apart from the law and by God's grace. It is a free gift.
- 5. We appropriate this righteousness to ourselves when we have faith in Christ. We will thereby be justified per (1), which remains true in principle.
- 6. In Christ, therefore, we are under grace and not under law.
- 7. One certifies this prescription by confessing with the lips that Jesus is Lord.

For your convenience and for comparison, the prescription of Jesus as summarized above is

THE KEY QUESTION: ETERNAL LIFE

repeated here:

- 1. Repent and confess your sins.
- 2. Confess Jesus before men.
- 3. Keep the commandments. Keep the Second Commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself. Keep the First and Great Commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your mind, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, for on these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. This is equivalent to the Great Principle of John 12:25.
- 4. Forsake the things of this world.
- 5. Follow Jesus by taking up one's own cross. This is the sum of the above.
- 6. Believe in Jesus by receiving and believing his words. This is the equivalent of all the above.

Or, put more concisely, "If you would enter into life, keep the commandments."

Setting these two prescriptions side by side brings three things into focus.

- First, it never occurred to Paul that God would forgive sins through simple repentance and confession. His early focus on the wrath of God, with the resulting suppression of the significance of the love of God, forced him into a perfectionist stance. He seemed to believe that, before God, the only way to be righteous is to be perfectly righteous, without sin or without any disobedience of the law.
- Second, his misappropriation of Jesus to be the expiator of our sins seemed a perfect fit for his personal needs, who never had any real conviction of sin and who excused his worst misdeeds because he did them "in ignorance."
- And third, he never gave much attention to the uttered words of Jesus. Had he listened to Jesus, he would have known better. But because he made Jesus the key player in his plan of salvation, seeming to exalt him in every way, he was able to convince the world of the correctness of his view. The true prescription for eternal life as uttered by Jesus has therefore been ignored. What irony!