

Priority One
January 12, 2014

The Sunday evening Bible Study group just started a new study on forgiveness. In tonight's lesson there is an appropriate point to this sermon.

The writer, Dr. Robert Jeffress, pastor at First Baptist Dallas, tells of his mother's death some years before. When it was discovered that she had inoperable cancer, a local television interviewer asked her, "Mrs. Jeffress, how does it feel to be terminal?" She answered, "The truth is, we are all terminal. The only difference is that some of us realize it and some of us don't."

We are all terminal. We are all going to die. In all our lifetimes no one has lived all that long in the scheme of things. According to the website of Guinness World Records, the greatest fully authenticated age to which any human has ever lived is 122 years 164 days. This was a man in France, Mr. Jeanne Louise Calment. Maybe someone in modern history has lived longer than him and it just could not be verified. But even so, we could easily say that no one in modern history has lived to be older than 150 years of age.

We are all terminal. We all die. And while some claim to have come back from the dead, there is no proof that what they saw or thought they saw was real. And if they really came back from the dead, they can't even verify that what they experienced was eternal life. It certainly wasn't eternal life for them. And the life they came back to will end soon enough.

John 6:27-29 (NIV)

"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

I will address two questions from this text this morning. The first question is...

What is the life to obtain?

The life to obtain is eternal life. That is a different life than any of us are now living. None of us are living eternal life. We will all die. And what then? Doesn't it seem a shame to live all these years, to get educated, build a family, a home, and then die and nothing? It seems almost wrong that life ends. Indeed, Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, outside of Jesus, said that God has placed eternity in our hearts. We don't want life to end, nor should it we believe.

God put eternal life in our hearts because there is the possibility of eternal life. Jesus says to pursue the food that results in eternal life. That is the life to obtain. It will be a life with so much more quality than this short, temporary life we are now living.

The life we are now living requires food. Food is of great importance to life. We have to work for food in order to maintain this life.

Jesus says there is a food for eternal life too. That is what He encourages His listeners to seek. Jesus adds that He is the one to give this food. The Jews of that day were expecting a future king to come in and rebuild the nation of Israel. God had promised this to them. One of the titles of the future king was Son of Man. This is the title Jesus used of Himself most often.

Jesus said that God had placed His seal of approval on Him, Jesus. That is, God has certified Jesus. We see that certification in the miracles Jesus did and in His teaching about the kingdom of God.

Certification is big today. Some years ago I wanted to replace my car. I wanted to get a good used car. I'm not a mechanic. How do I know if a car is in good shape other than by test driving it? Now, some companies that sell used cars certify some of their cars. That means they check them out thoroughly, make any necessary repairs, and give it a better warranty than you will get from the guy down the street who has an extra car to sell. You pay more for certified used cars, but you are getting more.

Jesus was certified by God to dispense food that resulted in eternal life. The word food, as used here, is a figure of speech for teaching. If you want eternal life, then you need to pay attention to the teaching of Jesus.

The people He was talking to were indeed interested in eternal life. In Jesus' day, that was a major subject of concern and debate. You see under the original covenant agreement that the Israelites had with God, they were not promised eternal life. The terms of that covenant promised them a certain level of good health. It promised military victory over their enemies. It promised prosperity of every womb, human and animal, in Israel. But it did not promise eternal life.

Yet they were very interested in eternal life. So when Jesus raises the subject of eternal life, they respond quickly. They want to know. So they ask Jesus.

What kind of work is involved in getting this life?

They knew the work of the first covenant. There were 613 commands to keep under that covenant. Some of those commands were religious practices or commands. Don't worship idols instead of Yahweh, the creator of heaven and earth and God of Israel. Some of those commands were civil in nature, what to do about those accused of a crime. And some of those commands were moral in nature. Don't steal. Don't murder.

The Jews in Jesus' day were used to rules and commandments, rituals and practices in order to be right with God. What they needed was how to gain eternal life. They figured eternal life required even more work to do. They thought there were more rules and commands, or rituals and practices, they needed to fulfill in order to receive eternal life.

That is natural. We think in terms of what we know. We imagine new things in terms of what we are already familiar with. So, since only God could give eternal life, and their relationship with God was all about rules and rituals, they assumed gaining eternal life would entail more rules and rituals. They would do these things and earn eternal life.

The word work often carries the idea of earning something. We work to earn money. We work to gain a reputation. We work to achieve a promotion. We work to develop a name for ourselves. All of these speak of earning something.

However, what Jesus is speaking of is not something earned. Rather, it is something given. Jesus gives this food that brings eternal life.

So He is using the word "work" differently than it is most normally used. How is He using it? He is using it as a simple receiving. The only "work" involved is to receive it.

I get offers for receiving all the time. They come in the mail, or by phone. I got one at the church office this week. The phone rang and I answered it. There was a pause and then a recording said, "Congratulations! You have won a cruise to the Bahamas." They wanted to give me a gift. All I had to do was receive it. There was probably some "work" I needed to do to receive it. There were likely steps I had to take.

But even if a gift is genuinely free, there is a process involved in getting it. For a sweepstakes contest prize, you usually have to sign an affidavit of eligibility. In a more simple gift, a present from a friend, you have to reach out and grasp it. You have to actually take possession of it.

Recently, I mailed my brother a Christmas present. Then I emailed his daughter and asked her to tell him to look for the package on his front porch. His front porch is hidden from the street. He enters the house by the garage. If I didn't tell him of the package, he might never see it on the front porch as he rarely goes there. So there are special steps he has to take to get his gift. He will have to open his front door, or walk around from the garage, to actually receive the gift. Few would call these extra steps "work". But you could use that word to describe what he has to do in order to receive the gift.

Jesus has a gift for us. It requires us to do something to receive it. But it is still a gift, not something earned, despite the steps necessary to receive it.

By their question, the people with Jesus were thinking of something more than a gift. They were thinking of a list of things to accomplish. They needed to know what else might be required in order to gain eternal life because the Law of Moses did not promise eternal life.

Jesus tells them that the "work" is to believe in Jesus. It wasn't anything hard. It was a simple step of faith. They had to believe in Jesus. They needed to choose Him as the object of their faith, their trust.

That is still the "work" that we must do to receive eternal life. We must believe in Jesus. Just as the word work has different meanings, so does the word believe. Belief in Jesus is spelled out in more detail in other passages of the Bible. He did not need to go into those details with these people. They understood what belief in someone, in their culture meant. Some of them had believed in John the Baptist, a prophet from God in that time. The same steps would be required to believe in Jesus.

Belief in Jesus includes...

Taking Jesus at His word.

To believe in Jesus is to accept His teaching. You may not understand everything He says, but you understand Him. You believe that He is the one sent by God. God has somehow convinced you. God has spoken to your heart and you just know. You just know that Jesus is the source of eternal life.

You may not have all your questions answered. You may not have anything you can use to convince anyone else of who Jesus is. But for yourself, you just know.

Belief in Jesus includes... Being baptized in His name.

Baptism is a public demonstration of your belief in Jesus. Baptism demonstrates that you believe Jesus and have become His follower. You identify yourself with what He said and did.

Belief in Jesus includes... Living in obedience to Him.

Jesus is called our Savior and Lord, two titles, each with significant meaning. He is our Savior because He died for our sins. Since He died for our sins, in our place, we can be forgiven and receive eternal life. Jesus rescues us, or saves us, from our sins, from the punishment for our sins.

Jesus, because of His sacrificial death for us, in accordance with God's plan, was made Lord of all the earth. It is His. He is Lord of all. One day every person will be faced with that truth. Until then, we who know it to be true, have turned our lives over to Him voluntarily. We are living for Him, just as He died for us.