Let’s look at the word “earn” today. Put it up on the screen here. Earn. When I say that word, what comes to mind? When you look it up the primary usage is of money made for services rendered. So I moved a lawn, that means I earned x amount. What it means then is that you did something so you earn something, usually money. The other way the word is used is in terms of some kind of promotion. I moved up of the ladder somehow in my work and I get a promotion. And it is simply assumed by the definition that this is earned in someway.

What’s interesting is that when you read the definitions, it all seems so obvious. You do this, you earn this. You do that you earn that. The definitions are very mathematical. If you do well in class you earn an A. If you do poorly, you earn an F. It’s a word closely related to deserve isn’t it? So earning and deserving are very similar terms. Another word associated with earning is entitled. Because I did some work, or put out some effort, I earn, or deserve, or am entitled to something, usually money. But something. And what really makes the definition interesting is that it assumes no controversy. It’s like math. If you do the work A you are entitled or deserve B. What could be more obvious? And often we as people are very, very clear are we not, about what have earned, or deserve, or are entitled to.

But here is the thing about earn, the word earn. And what is so fascinating is that the definition if I have this word right, leaves out completely the most important thing about the word earn, or earning. Totally misses it. And that thing is that earning is an attitude. Earning is an attitude, that’s it. It’s not math at all, in it’s most important sense. Earning is an attitude. It’s an attitude that you bring to what work, or whatever it is that you are doing. So you could be here this morning, and because you showed up today you might think that you’re earning something, or that you deserve something, or that you are entitled to something. It’s an attitude. I could do it to. I could be here and say because I showed up, I’m entitled. I’m earning points on some scale that I’ve set up in my head. Earn or earning is an attitude. And as I think about it, that’s all it is, nothing more.

I came across this in something I was reading a while back by Dallas Willard. And it just hit me like a ton of bricks. Just floored me. And I think the reason is that when I’ve use the word earn, I really have automatically created some kind of mathematical equation in my head, based on some notion of what I deserve that’s in my head. Earning for me was never understood by me as an attitude. I’ve really thought I earned it. Or someone else didn’t earn it. What a shock to the system to realize, I think, that Dallas Willard was (he died a few years ago) exactly right. Earning is an attitude.

It's hard to think of a teaching that explains reality more. Because in the world we live in, what is more dangerous, or creates more resentment, or leads to violence, or destroys community than this little word earn? It’s such a simple sound isn’t it to make with your throat. But what do we fight about more deeply than what we think we’ve earned, or deserve? Or are entitled to? Not much? I think it’s because we don’t think of it as an attitude. Instead, we create a scorecard in our head so that we earn it or deserve it. But maybe someone else made up a different scorecard didn’t they? Maybe about you. Maybe about me. Maybe about our race, or background. What family you came from? And these scorecards are often quite rigid. We’re pretty sure arn’t we about what we’ve earned or deserve. We often might make our minds about others as well. But it all fails to understand what earning is. It’s mostly an attitude. And what happens to us, when that’s our attitude?

Here's an example of something that I experienced a long time ago but just sticks in my mind. I’ve mentioned this before. But when I was seminary I spent a month on an Indian reservation in Sells Arizona living with a Native American family. And at the time there wasn’t much employment there, but of course everyone got their government check. And it was interesting how these people told the story so that they earned it this money, and deserved it, and were entitled to it. They saw it as rent money. They saw the land around their reservation as theirs, they saw themselves as landowners who deserved their rent. Now of the course, the rent was nowhere near what they thought it should be. They thought, with all that they gone through in their history that they deserved much more. Well, that’s a little different scorecard isn’t it, than someone else who sees that government money as a handout. Or welfare, or free money. Dangerous isn’t it? Very. But what’s the problem there? People create a scorecard, instead of realizing that earning is an attitude. Every once in a while you run into a person and you say, you know, “that person has an attitude”. Boy, it comes out here doesn’t it when you bring up that little word “earn”.

I think probably the most basic teaching of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is that we can’t earn it. That we don’t deserve it. I think even the most wayward Christian would at least understand this, that the foundation of our lives is a gift that we have not earned. Now maybe we can spiritualize that out of everyday life, and make it about heaven or something. Push it into the next life. That the way you can dismiss Jesus. But what Jesus came to bring had to do with this life, most of all. These are first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. This is the reality of the Holy Spirit coming into the world. And he talks about 4 kinds of people. The poor. The captives, prisoners and such. The blind, who usually were beggers, and the oppressed. And this society wasn’t that much different than our own, in that the dominant view was that the poor and oppressed where that way because they earned it. We know that attitude. If you’re successful it’s because you’ve earned it and if your not it’s because you’ve earned it. Well what is the Good News that Jesus brings to these lowlifes. Well, it will be something they don’t deserve, and haven’t earned. The response of the people who are listening to this, is the desire to kill him, that’s next weeks text. And we all know what happens don’t we when people start getting what we think they don’t deserve or haven’t earned. We know this attitude. Jesus is going to go right after this?

Remember the story in Bible about the Landowner who hired people to work in his vineyard? It was a Parable Jesus told about the kingdom he came to bring…today. He hires people who work all day, some ¾ of the day, some ½ a day, some a ¼ of the day, maybe some for the last 5 minutes. Remember what happens. Yeah, they all get paid the same. Oh that made people mad. It doesn’t mean everyone should be paid the same, but it sure is addressing that attitude isn’t it? And it what it does to our world?

What about our second lesson today? Think of all the parts of body and what would happen if they all adopted earn as an attitude, deserve, entitled. I think of that poor liver, having to filter out all that junk out of the blood. And the liver looks at the stomach and goes? Wow, that stomach gets all the pizza, and the steak? But the stomach is looking at the tongue and saying, that isn’t right, the tongue gets all the taste. And what about the poor intestines. By the time the food gets there, the intestines have to put up with what’s left. I didn’t earn this, or deserve this. I’m entitled to I don’t know what, but it isn’t this. The lungs, they’ve got it easy. And the lungs are saying, “you don’t have to deal with covid 19”. And the brain is saying, “you’re all a bunch of idiots. Trying thinking”. And the heart of course thinks it’s doing all the work, I never get a break.. That fact is, without each different thing, no one could live. Isn’t that interesting. Everyone has their own scorecard and they call it earn. Nope, its an attitude. What’s going to happen if that takes over? You won’t be alive long. And if you do, the character of your society is going to be ugly indeed. Miserable. And that’s exactly what we’ve got right now. We have to think about this little sound. This little word. Earn. And what we think we’ve earned. The good and the bad. Think you earned it? A little dangerous. But an interesting conversation.

Earning is often associated with respect. Respect has to be earned we say. You’re not entitled to it. And that’s very interesting too, but here’s what I’ve notice about the people who earn our respect. That hardly ever have the attitude. I’ve watch medal of honor ceremonies over the years and just about everyone of these highly respected people says the same thing. I was just doing my job. The guys who really deserve this didn’t make it back home. That attitude of “I deserve it” is gone. And there’s a new world that takes over. It’s the world of gift. I don’t know if any of you watch Yellowstone, the TV drama. But there is one scene where this troubled kid is brought to the ranch and is just starting to work there. And one day they are in the barn and looking at the horses and the ranch and the scenery. And the forman of the ranch says to this bad attitude kid. I want to teach you the first lesson today. What’s that, the kids says. “You can’t earn this”, says the forman. “We try, but we can never earn this” And flooding out of the TV screen is the reality of life as a gift. And you can see it anywhere, in people of any circumstance. How do you make that little switch in your own soul? From earning to gift?

The Good News can be many things. But one this it is, is that this scorecard we have in our head about who deserves what can be healed. And it’s healed by getting something that you can’t earn. A welcome, a place, life, eternity, your family, your heartbeat. Sheer gift. It’s a changed heart, a changed life. Amen.