

# “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself”

Luke 10:25-37

The expert in the law asked Jesus the question that seems to always be on the mind of those sitting on the fringe of God’s church: “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The man who asked this question knew the answer, and it was the right answer. But it was really the wrong question to ask. He asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He should have asked, “What has *God* done that I may inherit eternal life?”

But this fellow who was talking to Jesus did not want to know what God does in our lives; he wanted to know what he needed to do to save himself. He clearly demonstrates that he already knew the answer: “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 love your neighbor as yourself.” It is always so good to know all the right answers. This is why we spend time memorizing Luther’s Small Catechism.

But what did knowing the right answer to the question actually get this “expert in the Law.” He needs a “What does this mean?” explanation. So, as Jesus often does, He tells him a parable. Basically, the point Jesus makes is that, in order to fulfill what God demands of us, we would need to be perfect in every way. We would need to treat every person that we meet in the same way that the Good Samaritan treated the man on the roadside. In order to inherit eternal life through the Law, we could never have a bad

thought about another person. We could never keep any of our worldly possessions as long as there was someone else who was in need. And this perfect lifestyle would have to be maintained for our entire lifetime. And, if that is not enough, remember that you are a child of Adam and you have already failed because of Original Sin.

There have been people throughout the history of the Christian church who have thought that this was possible. They thought that they could keep all of God's Law. Clearly they had completely missed the message of the Gospel. They had completely missed the message of God's forgiveness brought through faith in Christ's suffering and death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. Can you imagine? The joy that we experience in the faith of our Baptism would be unknown. The grace of God would be unknown to them. For anyone who places their hope for salvation and eternal life in their own actions, in their own works, I can't imagine the despair.

This is what Martin Luther dealt with. Next year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the posting of the 95 Theses. Of all the things Luther wrote, nothing sticks with me more than his Preface to the 1<sup>st</sup> set of Luther's Works published a year before he died. He wrote about what he experienced in his early years as a monk and a priest. His journey to Rome was a major frustration. His study of God's Word, especially the phrase "the righteousness of God" confused him. He wrote that he "hated that righteous God." Only when he understood that it is God's righteousness that is placed on us that makes us holy in the eyes of God did his attitude toward God change. Luther said "it was as if the gates of heaven opened" to him.

This joy of the Gospel is something that we are tempted to take for granted. We will inherit eternal life, but not because we are such good people, or have kept God's commands. We have done absolutely nothing to deserve the mercy and forgiveness that God has shown to us. We will inherit eternal life because the Holy Spirit called us to faith in our Baptism, and we return again and again to hear the message that through the blood of Christ our sins have been forgiven, and to receive Christ's Body and Blood at the Lord's Table.

We see how it is God, and God alone, who has brought about a fundamental change in His people. We were dead in our sins; we are now alive in Christ. And now because the Lord has first forgiven us, because He first loved us, He now says: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The only reason that we are able to show any love toward our neighbor is because we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. The good works that we perform do not earn ourselves points toward eternal life. The good works that we do are thank offerings for the forgiveness of sins, which we have already received in faith.

We forgive each other and are kind to each other because of our love for God, because He showed mercy, kindness, and forgiveness to us first. God wants us to live a life of pureness and holiness, but we can never live up to the expectations that the Law demands of us. However that does not mean that we give up and say "Why bother even trying? After all, we are forgiven, so let's do what we want to do."

Christ not only teaches us to put our faith and trust in Him, but He also encourages a life of good deeds, kind actions, and forgiveness. And that is what the story of the Good Samaritan is all about. This is not just the story

of one man helping another. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. The Jews hated the Samaritans more than they hated the Romans and vice versa. This story is first and foremost a story of forgiveness. Before the Good Samaritan did any kind deed, he needed to forgive this Jew, this ancestral enemy of the Samaritans. It was unheard of for Samaritans and Jews to even speak to one another, let alone in kindness, and let alone show the mercy that this man did.

Jesus says to each of us: "Although you are not saved through your good works, doing good to your neighbor is pleasing to God." God has been merciful to you. God has shown kindness to you. God has forgiven you. "You go, and do likewise." Amen.