

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 10:25–37

July 10, 2022

He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”
Lk 10:26–27

What Do *You* Think?

Dear brothers and sisters loved by God and called

to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”¹ This is the question from a certain lawyer to Jesus that frames our Gospel text this morning, what we have come to call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Of course, that question presumes that eternal life is real and exists, and that there is a way to get there. If Jesus were here in the flesh today going around our community I wonder if anyone would ask Him that same question? I would offer to you this morning that most people don’t spend much time thinking about a life that continues after this one because most people don’t believe eternal life is real and exists. Sure the idea might come in handy if someone dies and there is a funeral. But even then it becomes very gauzy and out of focus, a person just becomes become one with the universe or with



¹ Lk 10:25.

nature when their ashes are sprinkled into Lake Huron. After all, in modern thinking this idea of life eternal, heaven and hell, it's nothing more than a very old superstition. We are well beyond such archaic notions in our current day and age.

But here in St. Luke's Gospel, as Jesus has begun his journey up to Jerusalem, eternal life is still very much the topic of the day. The lawyer comes up to ask Jesus this question because it's a question that any rabbi would be expected to receive, and any rabbi would be expected to give the right answer. But there is much more at stake with this conversation between Jesus and this unnamed lawyer than a simple question and answer from the rabbi catechism of that day. We need to go deeper into this parable to understand what is happening and what it means for us now. I'm sure that you have heard this parable expressed in very simplistic moral terms: be like the Samaritan. Be a "Good Samaritan." If you see someone in a ditch don't walk by like the priest and Levi, instead do the right thing. Sometimes this gets expanded with racial or religious overtones—if you see someone in a ditch and they are not like you, then especially go help, you must help those who are outside of your ethnic or social sphere, even if, especially if, you don't like them. And of course those are all good things. But Jesus does not give us these parables in order to merely lay out a set of instructions for how to be a good person. Christians do not have a corner on the market for helping people who are lying in the ditch. This parable, as always, is about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Back to the question of the day: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

The question is a test, a trap. The lawyer undoubtedly knows something about this Jesus, and about the radical nature of the teaching that He brings, and so he does not ask Jesus humbly for an answer to something that he is genuinely concerned about. He tries to spring a trap. Maybe he can catch Him saying something wrong, and that will at a minimum discredit Him in the eyes of all the people that are following Him, especially these disciples of His. But Jesus does what any good teacher does in this situation. Knowing what is going on, knowing that the question comes not from a place of genuine interest for learning, but rather from a place of trying to score points and cause contention, Jesus turns the question around. He said to the lawyer, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”² In effect is He is saying, “You know the answer before you ask it. I know what is in your heart. What do you think? Why don’t you go ahead and tell me?” And so the lawyer gives the standard answer, the one everyone would expect, the one that Jesus even says on a couple of occasions Himself. Love God, love your neighbour. Straight from Deuteronomy and from the Book of Leviticus, chapter and verse. That’s the answer Jesus was expecting. “And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.’”³

But isn’t there something wrong with the question? “What must I do to inherit eternal life.” Think about that. Since when does anyone “do” anything to gain

² Lk 10:26.

³ Lk 10:28.

an inheritance? The only thing that qualifies you to inherit something is usually the fact that you were born into a certain family. And last time I checked you didn't have anything to "do" with deciding who gave birth to you, who your parents were, what family you became a part of. That's the nature of an inheritance. It's not a payment for services rendered. It's a gift and a promise. So if eternal life is an inheritance, if it is likewise therefore something that you obtain by virtue of a gift and promise, what can you do to obtain it? The lawyer asks this question from the same place that everyone does. Our sinful natures want to look inward. We want to stand in judgement of ourselves, and if we are really honest about it, in judgement of God, and we want to set the standards by which we will inherit eternal life. Along with the lawyer we want to justify ourselves, to establish our own righteousness before God. Surely I love God with all my heart, with all my soul, all my strength, all my mind. Isn't that what matters? Jesus says "do this and you will live." What He doesn't say: "Because you have done all these things, you have earned your way into eternal life. Congratulations." Some people say, "all these I have kept from my youth."⁴ But then Jesus says, "there is one thing you lack." There is always something. There is always a piece of the self-justifying puzzle that is missing, a part of the Law broken, a sin concealed and hidden away, a barrier to obedience. The Law is strange like this. "The law is holy," writes St. Paul, "and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."⁵ But when a sinner falls into the hands of the

⁴ Mk 10:20.

⁵ Ro 7:12.

Law it goes the same way it did for the man who fell into the hands of robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Law tears your clothes off of you and leaves you lying there half dead. The Law takes all your righteousness from you, the righteousness you believed you could cover yourself with. Your love is not good enough. It is full of self-interest and self-congratulation. Repentance is full of self-pity and narcissism and dishonesty. Nothing is enough. The soul is destitute and naked. The Law beats the soul and lets the soul fall hard and painfully. You have never loved God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You have never done anything good without congratulating yourself afterwards, or hoping for the praise of others. You have never once prayed the Lord's Prayer with full devotion, and you cannot confess your sins or hear God's Word preached without thinking scattered and conceited thoughts. Or struggling to stay awake. Love God, love your neighbour, to obtain eternal life? You might as well say you must jump over a 10 foot fence to obtain eternal life.

Then Jesus comes wandering down, and He is on the road to Jerusalem where He will be nailed to a cross, brutally tortured and killed, not because He has not loved God with all His heart, soul, strength, and mind, but because you have not. Because you cannot. But Jesus has mercy on you. In fact, this is why He has come. This is why He comes to you today, in the preaching of this Word, and in the Holy Communion in which we partake. He bends down and sees you lying in the ditch, naked, in shame, beat up, and He binds up your wounds. He pours on the oil of His Gospel message, that your sins are forgiven for His sake,

and pours out His Holy, precious Blood in the cup of His new covenant. He lifts you up out of the ditch and takes you into His care, not mindful of the cost.

Who does this? Our Saviour does this. He pays for the wretched person, in order to atone for what we have broken. He took on our cause. This is what He does: He takes every wretched and wounded soul that would otherwise be left for dead in the ditch of hell and He carries them into His very person, He pays for all that is lacking. He gives eternal life, by the grace of God, through faith in the promise.

We see how the lawyer, however, is still stuck in himself. He can't get beyond self justification, even when Jesus gives him the opportunity to hear and see, to repent and believe. In fact the lawyer doesn't even bother with the first part of his own answer, "Love God," since he thinks he's got that part down pat. But still he wants to justify himself in front of the Teacher. So he "said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'"⁶ In answering the question with this parable Jesus points the lawyer, and us, to different question: to whom must I become a neighbour? In other words, if God has come in the Flesh in order to take away my sins, to lift me up and heal my wounds, what are the implications for how I relate to others who are in that same ditch? The answer is that we are to become neighbours to all who are in need of body and soul. The first two passers-by all had their reasons for not stopping. The priest didn't want to become ritually unclean, he didn't want to take a chance on touching a dead

⁶ Lk 10:29.

person, or helping someone apart from his own people, which would not be looked upon favourably. The Levite, well, he was second fiddle to the priest in the Jerusalem temple hierarchy. If the priest wouldn't help then how would it look if he did? There are lots of excuses not to become a neighbour to someone in need. But God is constantly putting people in our path. And He gives us the Words of this Gospel so that we would not pass by, so that we would become a neighbour to all in need. The person in the ditch might be someone you see in your own home, in your own family, or on your street, or in a far away land. There are people who are living quietly in the ditches of sin and unbelief, people we know, people we don't know, and they need wounds bound and cared for, they need to be lifted up and put back on solid ground. Yet everyday Christians walk by these people. It's inconvenient. They aren't like us. You know how it is, bad company makes bad habits.

The Son of God show us the proper orientation toward those in the ditch. Hear the words of St. John: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."⁷ The spiritual distress of our day is incredible. You all know people in the ditch. What would happen if next week everyone invited one person to come and hear the message of the Gospel? What would happen if you

⁷ 1 Jn 4:9–11.

shared the Word of Christ with someone in your circles who has abandoned God or His Church? Perhaps they need just a simple little reminder of how good it is to believe in God, to have the hope of eternal life, and how much the Church has to give. Food, clothing, shelter—mattresses—these are all important too, of course. God provides for our bodies as well as for our souls. But let us always remember that those things can be found in lots of places, but the Christian Church, the Body of Christ, offers something that you can't get anywhere else: the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. That's the greatest thing there is.

So with St. Paul let us walk in a manner worthy of the inheritance we have received, the gift we did not earn or deserve. Let us bear fruit in the company of those ditch-dwellers we may come across, because Christ has pulled us up out of the ditch, and healed our wounds and set us in His care. Let us always rejoice that “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”⁸

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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⁸ Col 1:13–14.