

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested [Jesus], saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" That's an interesting question, isn't it? It isn't the only time Jesus is asked the question. If you ask two of our catechumens the question, they may give you the answer, since we talked about that just about one year ago—it won't be the one Jesus gave, because He saw right through the question to what those who were asking really wanted.

What must you do to inherit eternal life? You do nothing to inherit anything! To be an heir and inherit something, you find yourself a beneficiary of someone who has died. You exist, for one thing, and find yourself related to or befriended by another. That person dies and bequeaths something to you. That you inherit anything is totally dependent on the person on the person who has died. That's why what you do to inherit anything is nothing! Matter-of-fact, you are a passive part of inheritance.

Of course, like I said, Jesus knew exactly what this lawyer was doing—he was giving Jesus a law-based question, typical of the kind of catechesis a lawyer, or expert in the Torah, would go through. So Jesus fires back with a couple of law questions. "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" And, the lawyer answers back perfectly. What he says is the perfect summation of the two tables of the Law—the first table, love God, and the second table, love neighbor. That's why Jesus answers, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

Think about it. The question the lawyer first asked was really, "What must I do to live for eternity?" "What must I do to *earn* eternal life?" "What must I do to be saved?" And the answer is, "Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Do these things, and that means don't stray one bit from doing them, and you will have earned eternal life.

If loving God and loving a neighbor could be separated into two distinct and unrelated ideals, loving God would be the easy one, at least as far as it can be verified externally. I can say, "I love God," and so long as I don't offend you by what I say or do, you have no way to tell if I am telling the truth or not. On the other hand, having love for your neighbor is a little more difficult. You may say that you love your neighbor but still hold ill-will or disdain for them, and this is quite easy to tell. You might not intend them harm, but for one reason or another, you simply don't like them, do whatever you can to avoid them, speak unfavorably about them, and think less of them than you think of yourself. So, say, "I love my neighbor," but treat them like this, and you are obviously a liar. Of course, you can't separate love for God and love for neighbor; the two go hand-in-hand, as St. John testifies in his first letter. (cf. 1 John 4:20)

Hence the lawyer's next question: "And who is my neighbor?" That's when Jesus tells the parable. It's often called the Good Samaritan, and the name has found its way into modern parlance to describe someone who does a good deed for a stranger. You'll note that nowhere in the parable or the surrounding text is the Samaritan called good. That's been added *ex post facto*.

In the parable, a certain man falls under the threat of some robbers who beat him to a bloody pulp, rob him, strip him, and leave him in a ditch to die. You can tell by Jesus calling him a "certain man," that the man was a Jew. A priest and a Levite happen upon him, but pass him by making sure to avoid him at all costs. It makes sense; the man is naked and bloody—to help him, even to come close to him and touch him as if to investigate, would have made them unclean and law-breakers. They couldn't do anything; their hands were tied—or so their excuse would go.

Then, the Samaritan happened upon the man. A Samaritan and a Jew—they would probably get along as well as a Republican and a Democrat, a Christian and a Muslim, or someone pro-traditional-

family and a homosexual. In the case of the parable, the man you are supposed to identify with—the Republican, Christian, or pro-traditional-family person (if you want)—is the man dying in the ditch. It's the Democrat, Muslim, or homosexual—the Samaritan—who comes along, picks up the man, binds his wounds, puts him on his own donkey, carries him to an inn, took care of him, provided for his continued care, and promised to provide even more to the innkeeper should it be needed. So, now, you tell me: who was the neighbor? Who was the one who kept the Law of God?

"He who showed mercy on him." The Samaritan, the Democrat, the Muslim, the homosexual—or, if you like, you can call him the Good Samaritan, the Good Democrat, the Good Muslim, or the Good Homosexual. It almost sounds detestable to put the adjective "good" in front of those people—perhaps it is completely detestable to some of you. You might imagine how the lawyer heard the parable, then, and how disgusted he must have been to give the answer, "He who showed mercy on him."

Now, imagine the stench in the air when Jesus tells the lawyer, "Go and do likewise." "You want me to act like a filthy Samaritan?" Jesus wants you to be and do "good" like that Samaritan—or, if it riles you up more, the Democrat, Muslim, or homosexual—to show mercy where mercy needs to be shown, which would be to everyone whom you meet, be it a fellow member of this congregation, someone with whom you simply don't get along, or even the Democrat, Muslim, or homosexual you might encounter. Be a neighbor to them; be a brother or sister to them. Do likewise, and you will have shown love for neighbor as for yourself.

Love for God and love for neighbor—keep these and you will have kept the Law of God and earn salvation. Of course, your Lutheran ears are tuned to hear that and think, "Impossible." Well, that's the Law of God for you, laying upon you impossible demands. You are beaten by it, stripped of all glory you may think that you have acquired by it, and left for dead in the ditch by it. If only One would come along, Someone good, who would bear you up, bind your wounds, and take you to an inn to be cared for.

Dear hearers, this is why this parable is often interpreted in these terms. One who is good does come along for you. For, "[W]hen the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5) You were under the Law, beaten under the weight of its demands, and left for dead for your failure to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and even your failure to love your neighbor as yourself. But Jesus bore the full weight of the Law demands for you—fulfilling the Law on your behalf—even to the point of death, the death of the cross.

He who only could be called good, does come along, finds you, bears you upon His shoulders, and carries you to the Inn of the Church, where you are cared for with the means that He leaves behind for you, even as He continues to send more and more so that you can be taken care of. These are the Word and Sacraments. Here, in this place, your wounds are bound as you confess your sins and receive absolution. Here, in this place, you are nursed back to life as the Word of God as His grace is proclaimed into your ears. Here, in this place, you are cared for week after week as Jesus gives you His body and blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation to be administered by His appointed innkeeper.

It's not necessarily bad to superimpose Jesus on the Samaritan in this way, as the One who is good to save your life. Two things to keep in mind, though, are that Jesus, for one thing, would never identify Himself with a Samaritan. He may be One whom a priest and Levite would chose to avoid, for reasons different than they avoided the bloodied man in the parable, but Jesus is a Jew, through and through—in fact, He was what the Jews were supposed to be. For another thing, Jesus did not tell this parable to demonstrate to the lawyer that he was like the man in the ditch, whether or not that was true, and needing someone to be merciful to him. Jesus was instructing the lawyer in what the law demands of him—he was supposed to be like the Samaritan. Any reading of this text otherwise is to read into it an interpretation, rather than reading out of it what it really says.

Jesus told the lawyer, and tells you, "Do this and you will live," and, "Go and do likewise." But recall also, that it was Jesus who said, "[W]ithout me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) Yes, Jesus does expect and command you to love your neighbor as yourself; it's right there in today's text. But He also knows that left to your own you are unable to do what He expects and commands you to do. That's why the Father grafts you to the Vine—the True Vine—so that in Him, that is Jesus Christ, you can do what He commands. Furthermore, your being grafted to the vine (note your passive participation in this) also gives to you grace from the Vine so that you would have remission for your transgressions against the expectations and commands of God. Therefore, grafted to the Vine, being placed into the Inn of the Church, you receive that remission and grace to "go and do likewise."

All of this is for the sake of Christ, the One in whose favor you are found. His death grants you the inheritance of salvation and life. Jesus is the answer to the question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus must die and rise again, and He must do so on your behalf. Here's the good news, dear hearers: Jesus has done just that. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. You are grafted to Him, the True Vine, carried by Him to His Inn, the Church, whereat you die and rise with Him, who is your propitiation, your Light and your Life, your Salvation, the forgiveness for all of your sins.

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