

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 5C (Proper 9C)
July 13, 2025
Luke 10:25-39

A Law Question and a Gospel Answer

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" 27 And he answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." 29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" . (Luke 10:25-29 ESV)

Dearly Beloved in Christ:

If you ask the wrong question, you won't get the right answer, unless you're asking Jesus. Today, we hear a lawyer test Jesus. So, you already know this will not end as he supposes or desires. And he does his testing with a law question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" That shouldn't be surprising since he was an expert in the law, though not as we might think. For this lawyer was a student of the Law of Moses, the Torah. He was knowledgeable in all the laws given to Israel through Moses—the civil laws, religious laws, ceremonial laws, the moral laws. His problem is that he misunderstood the Torah and thought eternal life was a result of keeping the law.

Still, the man asks an important question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Indeed, what could be more important than gaining eternal life? If you don't have that, then death is the end for you—and something even worse after death.

But the lawyer's question is the wrong question. It's a Law question: What shall I "do" to inherit eternal life? He shows thereby that he thinks that by his doing, by his keeping of God's Law, he can earn his way to eternal life. But the truth is, we will not and cannot do enough to merit eternal life. This lawyer doesn't grasp that. So Jesus wants to straighten him out on this, to dispel the notion that you can work your way into heaven. It's good for us to get that straight, too.

Since the lawyer asks a Law question, Jesus turns it around and sees if the man can come up with a Law answer. Jesus asks him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" In other words, what would you have to do if you're going to gain eternal life on the basis of the Law?

The man answers, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." Now

that's a correct answer, as far as it goes. It's a good summary of the Ten Commandments: Love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. In fact, on another occasion, Jesus Himself uses that same twofold summary to talk about the Ten Commandments.

Notice that Jesus commends the lawyer's answer: "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." "Do this," and you will live. Ah, there's the catch! Do we do this? Do we love God and love our neighbor well enough to earn eternal life? The answer is "of course not!" I don't love God as I ought, and you don't, either. That's what God's Word says about our sinful nature. Likewise, with loving my neighbor as myself. I've got the loving-myself part down pretty well. It's the loving-my-neighbor thing I have trouble with. How about you?

As you would expect, this lawyer thinks he keeps the Law well enough. He's sure he loves God as he should. But that "loving your neighbor" thing is tough. And since he wants to "justify himself," he wants to narrow down who qualifies to be his neighbor. He's looking for a loophole.

So he asks, "And who is my neighbor?" In other words, who qualifies to get my love? You see, if I can eliminate the bad people and the disgusting people and the people who inconvenience me, then I think I just might be able to do this "love your neighbor."

But "Love your neighbor as yourself" doesn't put a limit on who your neighbor is. So, Jesus, wanting to correct the lawyer's misunderstanding of the Torah, tells a story that anyone can understand, at least on the surface level. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead." It would be tempting to think that those robbers, who obviously aren't very loving, aren't worthy of love. After all, I'm glad I'm not one of them. I'm certainly better than they are.

Jesus continues, "Now by chance a priest was going down that road." Oh, a priest! Here's a good guy for our story! I mean, who could be more pious and religious than a priest? I'm sure he'll do the right thing. "A priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side." Oops! The priest doesn't do anything. He doesn't hurt the guy, but he doesn't help him, either. He keeps himself ceremonially clean by not coming into contact with what might be a dead body.

"So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." Passed by on the other side. The Levite doesn't help, either. Two religious leaders, two pillars of the community, passed by without helping. Where's this story going?

"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion." A Samaritan? Really, Jesus, a Samaritan? This would have come as a shock to the lawyer. After all, the Jews, and especially her leaders, despised the Samaritans. And Jesus uses him as someone outside the bounds of neighbors we should love.

So, it's a Samaritan who comes to where the injured man is, and he has compassion on him. Just like Christ came down from heaven and came to where we are, lying not just half-dead, but fully and completely dead spiritually, unable to save ourselves. Our Lord did not pass by on the other side. No, He comes to us, where we are. And He has compassion on us. Jesus is moved with mercy within Him, and His mercy moves Him into action.

Which is what the Samaritan in the story does. "He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine." Loving your neighbor isn't a feeling or an emotion, but it means actually helping your neighbor. And so Jesus comes to us with healing, with His restorative care. And this healing happens by Jesus Himself being beaten up, whipped, and nailed to a cross. For by His wounds we are healed.

Christ's love is sacrificial love, like how the Samaritan helps the man in the story: "Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'"

In the same way, Jesus pays the price, whatever it takes, for us to be saved, to gain eternal life. As the Samaritan supplied the innkeeper, so Christ supplies the church with the resources necessary to extend His love to others. This is the church's ministry of mercy.

Now we see what loving your neighbor looks like. We see it in the story Jesus tells. We see it in the story Jesus lived, in the life and death and resurrection with which Jesus loves us.

Then Jesus brings the story home to the lawyer. Of the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" Look what Jesus does to the lawyer's original question. The lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus turns it around and asks, "Who was a neighbor to the man who was hurt?" You see, it's not about who qualifies to be your neighbor and thus deserves your love. No, it's about you being a neighbor to others, to whoever happens to be lying in your path. That's what loving your neighbor is all about.

So, who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? "The one who showed him mercy," the lawyer responds. And Jesus says, "You go, and do likewise." See how that works for you. See how well you do at trying to justify yourself. I bet you'll fall short. You cannot save yourself by means of the Law. That's what you need to discover.

No, you and I cannot gain eternal life by our works. If we're going to have eternal life, we need to receive it as a gift. Indeed, that's the only way to receive an inheritance. So give up trying to justify yourself. Admit your sins, your lack of love for God and neighbor. Receive the free gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Joined to Jesus in Holy Baptism, you become an heir with Him. This is the only way to inherit eternal life.

Then, once you are a Christian, you will take this love you've received from God, and you can and will show this type of Good-Samaritan love, this Christ-like love, to others, to any person who happens to cross your path. Not to justify yourself. Not because you think you can earn your way into heaven. But because you are a new person now in Christ, and so you reflect His love and compassion to the people you meet.

Dear friends, the good news today is this: Jesus is our Good Samaritan! He comes to us where we are. He does not pass by on the other side. He has compassion on us. He is moved with mercy, and He does something about it. Jesus does everything it takes to give us the help and the healing we need to have eternal life. And since you have received such mercy, go and do likewise. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener