

Introduction to reading: Ok, without reading ahead into our Gospel lesson... How many of you have heard the story of the Good Samaritan? Give me a show of hands. Now how many could describe what takes place immediately prior to Jesus telling this parable?

Some people will tell the parable of the Good Samaritan in isolation – all by itself. We miss so much if we rip this parable out of the context in which Jesus offers it. Listen closely please to the 5 verses that lead into the parable, as we hear the life-changing lesson Jesus teaches here.

Read Luke 10:25-37

Right here, from the lips of this expert in the law, is the biggest question a human being could ask. In essence it is the question: *What is the way to heaven?* Although in this case, the one asking the question gives away his bias ahead of time. The answer he already has in mind shows in the phrasing he chooses: *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Now... how is Jesus going to redirect him away from his misleading phrasing and thought, to the correct answer? What better route to take than to ask an expert of the law of Israel about the Law he has studied? “What is written in the Law of God? How do you understand it?”

The answer given by the expert in the law is: Love. More than just following the letter of God’s law – God desires our hearts. He wants us to love him...He wants us to love others as ourselves. Yes, this expert in the law gets an important point of God’s law that many overlook: God isn’t just interested in right behavior. The issue of obedience runs deeper. The perfect attitude, Love, must come hand-in-hand with the action, in order for it to be good in God’s sight.

Jesus replies: “Right on! Do this all the time your-life-long-through, and you’ll have earned yourself a ticket to heaven.”

And here’s where the expert in the law takes us to his follow-up question: “And who is my neighbor?”

See this question for what it is: An expert in the law is trying to get by – get off or get free – by getting technical.

Here’s a place to pause for application, if you haven’t already been thinking of that: “Expert in the law” is a hat which I think we all attempt to “put on” at times. We try to get by – get off – on technicalities, when it comes to God’s law.

- It shows up in childhood at times, like when mom or dad gives an answer to “can we have a cookie?” with “Not before supper.” And so, you quietly sneak into the kitchen and eat a piece of cake. A little time passes, then the call rings out as supper is being prepared... “Which of you children ate a piece of cake before supper?” “Well, you only said I couldn’t eat a cookie. You didn’t say anything about cake.”
- And when we get a little older, and we reach those years of “courting,” the temptation to get technical may prove especially enticing. We’re tempted to ask: “What can I get away with?” And if we try to get real technical about the actions, it is easy to forget about the attitude accompanying them. We easily get ourselves entangled when we try to get by on a technicality when it comes to God’s law.
- The more mature we get in years, the more likely we are to start down some different paths: “Do I really need to forgive this person when it’s clear from their actions that they feel no remorse? Can I

justify a little resentment toward that neighbor who not only has so much more than me, but who seems to “rub the fact in my face” every passing opportunity he gets? Is it ok to say a bad word – or to speak a hurtful comment – if it just slips out, before I think about it? I didn’t really mean to say it.”

The expert in the Law had answered correctly about God’s law: it is about both attitude and action; it is about both love for God and love for others. Period. Do this and you will live.

Now anyone looking at that objectively and honestly has run out of room to justify themselves. And so, when the expert in the law wants to justify himself, he has to get technical. If he wants to earn his way to eternal life, he has to try to get by – get off or get free – on a technicality. So he asks: “And who is my neighbor?”

Now, if we aren’t careful, this 2nd question from the expert in the law could divert our attention away from the 1st & most essential question. But Jesus won’t allow that. See Jesus use this opening, in order to bring us right back around to the answer to our first & fundamental question: “What is the way to heaven?” Let’s see Jesus’ answer to both:

Jesus’ parable begins with a “sin in progress” – several of them in fact. The robbers bloodied and beat a man, stealing, and leaving him for dead. But Jesus doesn’t leave the near-dead man at the side of the road. Quickly, Jesus moves on to a Priest and a Levite who come upon the scene. Picture jaws dropping at this point as Jesus tells the parable. A different type of sin shows up on the scene – less “violent” one might think, but just as deadly in the end. Everyone knew that a Priest and Levite knew what God wanted in this situation: to show love to the man who had been robbed, beaten and left for dead. But they walked right by the opportunity God put in their path. We call this a sin of omission: when one of us fails to do the good God commands.

Here’s our 2nd place to pause for a moment of introspection.

- Which gets our attention more easily – our sins of commission, like when we lash out with hurtful actions or words, or our sins of omission? For example... How often have I failed to give help and show kindness, when it meant I would have had to give up something precious to me, like some of my time or something else I wanted to keep for myself?

We all have plenty in this parable to show us our sin, and lead us to give up the hopeless quest to justify ourselves.

Lord, lead us on to your answer for hope! We’ll arrive there by the end. For the moment...

To understand the rest of the parable, you need to understand a little history. Ok? Go back about 700 years before the day Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The nation of Israel by that point had divided into 2 nations: North and South. The Assyrian nation came and conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They carried off into captivity many of the Israelites from the Northern Kingdom. They imported colonists from other portions of the Assyrian empire. The Israelites left behind intermarried with the Assyrian colonists. This was in the area called Samaria. And by the time of Jesus’ life & ministry, a whole new people, with their own culture, had developed: the Samaritans. The pockets of people who still maintained their Jewish heritage at the time of Jesus were found: 1) in Judea, South of Samaria, where

Jerusalem was located; & 2) in Galilee, to the North of Samaria, where Jesus had lived growing up and where many of Jesus' disciples were from originally. Most of these people, the Jews of Jesus' day, despised the Samaritans. And that's what makes the point of Jesus' parable all the more clear.

So the Samaritan, whom Jesus brings mercifully into the scene in this parable, would have grown up being treated like dirt by the Jews. And the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is in the heart of Jewish territory. So we have no reason to believe anything other than: the man robbed and left for dead is a Jew himself. And yet... in Jewish territory, where this Samaritan – we'd think – would be the most likely target for being robbed himself, or possibly be falsely accused of wrong doing along the road, he – at risk to his own wellbeing, and at great personal expense – helps the man.

Suddenly Jesus brings the parable to his point: Who is your neighbor? Anyone whom God brings into your life. Love them.

And with that the central issue, with which the expert in the law began, is made crystal clear as well: Now anyone trying to justify themselves by some technicality has run out loopholes.

- Ask yourself: how many attempts have I made to get by on a technicality when it comes to the question of “who is my neighbor”?
“But I don't know that person!”
“I know that person all too well – and she has hurt me horribly, and now I'm supposed to love her?!?”
“There are just too many people whom I encounter to be loving toward all of them!”

All such attempts to skirt God's law fail.

And that conclusion might seem scary at first, because we all know... we have failed miserably to obey God's law. And we deserve the just punishment of death – the death of hell. God's law at this point has done its chief work: God has convinced us to give up trying to justify ourselves.

God's Word leads us on to our only hope. Jesus is the one who has loved like the Samaritan pictured in the parable. Jesus didn't cross to the other side, or pass by when he saw us lying spiritually dead and hopeless in our sin. He didn't worry about his own safety. He threw himself into our rescue. By his own life of love, he supplies the holiness that alone makes us able to stand in God's presence. He gave himself to be wounded, beaten, suffering death and hell in our place. By his blood, he washes us clean and brings us healing and life eternal.

In Pisidian Antioch the apostle Paul proclaimed: “Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). To be justified is to be declared innocent and holy in God's sight.

And now each of us, whom God has brought to believe and treasure how Jesus has loved us in this way, we look back at the law of God, and we are moved to love our neighbors. When Jesus concludes this parable by saying, “Go and do likewise,” it's a joy for us to see His command. God – in another familiar portion of Scripture – puts it in powerful brevity: “We love because he first loved us.” There is the answer to our service theme today: What's life like for a follower of Christ? We show love, which flows from his love. Amen.