

“The Question Should Be...”

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷He answered: " '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.'" ²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

³⁶"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

“What must I do to inherit eternal life” (vs. 25)? Best case scenario is that this Jewish leader was like Nicodemus (member of the Jewish ruling council that came to talk to Jesus – John 3) and Jesus teaching had moved him to rethink some of his long standing religious beliefs. Worst case scenario, and most likely, is that this Jewish leader was simply trying to “test” Jesus, trying to get him to say something damning or to get him to choke on his own “aah’s and um’s” making him look not all that smart and eloquent after all. Either way this Jewish expert in the Law, well versed in Scripture, knew the answer to the question already. **“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” (vs. 27).** Yet knowing the answer to this question doesn’t mean you actually KNOW and understand the answer to this question. So whether he was really looking for peace with God or not, Jesus challenged this man’s current understanding of how to be at peace with God in an effort to reshape his mindset. **“You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied, ‘Do this and you will live”” (vs. 28).** The lawyer asked Jesus “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The tense of the verb “do” tells us that the Jewish leader was looking for a list of action items that he could accomplish to feel at peace with God. This man was looking for God’s version of the “honey do” list so that he could cross

them off the list, feel better about himself, and then he could move on to other things in his life in good conscience knowing that he had already taken care of his eternal salvation. **‘Do this and you will live’**” (vs. 28b) Jesus says. “Do this” – the tense of the verb “do” that Jesus uses here is different than the way that the Jewish leader used that word. “Do this – love God and love your neighbor” continually, constantly, all the time, and without fail and you will be saved eternally. God’s law is not some sort of buffet where you pick a lot of what you like and a little of what you don’t. None of us can say to God, “Give me two scoops of love my family, a slab of rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn, and a heap of do unto others as they do to you, but none of that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit stuff, or that praise of God and vulgar language should not come from the same mouth command, or that love your enemies and even strangers who have physical and spiritual needs talk.” No, God’s law is served prepackaged. Everyone gets everything and is expected to dot every “i” and cross every “t” of God’s law perfectly. Jesus was trying to help the man and all of us understand that it is impossible for human beings like us to keep God’s law perfectly. As St. James reminds us, **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it”** (James 2:10). Jesus point is that the question should not be – “what must I do to inherit eternal life,” but rather the question should be “how is it possible that I can enjoy eternal life in heaven, because I have not kept God’s law perfectly as he demands?” God happily answers that question in the Bible. **“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23)**. None of us can keep God’s law perfectly, but Jesus kept every bit of God’s law perfectly in our place. Each of us deserves the eternal regret and flames of Hell, but Jesus endured that Hell for each one of us when he suffered and died on the cross. None of us can earn heaven, but through faith in Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior God gives it to us as a GIFT!

This was a foreign concept to that Jewish expert in the law so he asks Jesus another question. **“And who is my neighbor?” (vs. 29)**. “If I can just get a clarification on who my neighbor is” thinks the Jewish leader, “then I can go home feeling good that things between me and God are okay.” The idea that somehow I have to or can play a role in my eternal salvation is hard to throw in the dumpster. So Jesus helps him do that by telling him the parable of the Good Samaritan. The hero and true neighbor in this story is a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews were enemies. Many Jews looked down on Samaritans because they were the mixed breed – some Jewish heritage, but also the heritage of a foreign country. Many Jews did not consider Samaritans to be their equals, and some even called the Samaritans ‘dogs.’ The hero in the story being a Samaritan was a slap in the face to this Jewish expert in the law! And to add insult to injury, who were the people who passed by the man in

need? It was the dream team of pure bred Jewish society: a Priest and a Levite. These were the clergy and leaders in the church! The point of the parable is clear. Our neighbor is anyone and everyone with a beating heart and a bodily or spiritual need regardless of their skin color, country of origin, or social status. Jesus point is that the question shouldn't be "who is my neighbor?" because that should be pretty obvious even without the story. The question really should be "Now that I know that I am going to spend eternity in heaven because of Jesus, which neighbor needs my help today?" And a follow up question – "What kind of physical or spiritual help do they need?" Do they need a kind word of encouragement? Do they need a prayer? Do they need someone to spend some time with them and a person willing to listen to them? Do they need some financial help? Do they need clothes, food, or some other material goods? Do they need us to support a larger charity that can provide them with more help than we can give as an individual? Do they need a loving call to repentance? Do they need someone to share the Gospel with them because they have no religion or their religion teaches them they have to earn their way to Heaven?

As much as I like this parable I have to admit that it crushes me with guilt like it should have the Jewish leader in our lesson for today. There have been plenty of times that I have been like the Priest and the Levite. Too busy, too indifferent, too selfish, too afraid. I console myself with the thought that this person got into this mess by making bad choices, or by being lazy, or by being a horrible person. I console myself with past experiences which taught me that some people are con artists and drama queens. I console myself with the thought that someone else, who is better equipped than me, will help this person. I console myself with the thought that my help would only be a band-aid on a much larger problem so why even bother? And there have been other times that I have played the role of Good Samaritan excellently. But I find that the times I remember most vividly are the times that I failed to be a Good Samaritan rather than the times I have. Does my life sound similar to yours? So what is the big takeaway from all this? I need Jesus every day and so do you. That is the only way to feel better. Repentance for not being the perfect Good Samaritan and reassurance that Jesus earned forgiveness for all my sins when he served as my perfect Good Samaritan on the cross. Jesus, my Good Samaritan, who covers every last one of my Good Samaritan shortcomings from God's sight with his perfect keeping of God's law as my substitute. Jesus, my Good Samaritan, who rose from the dead so that not only do I have an eternity in heaven to look forward to, I can now find joy and time to ask the question, "which neighbor needs my help today?" The world doesn't need another eternal Savior, but the world could use more Good Samaritans, people who are thankful for the gifts God gives through Jesus that they are intentionally looking to be Good Samaritans. Amen.