

Wrong Question... But The Right Answer

A Sermon on Luke 10:25-37

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JJ¹

No lawyers here today, right? Okay, good. Then we can talk about them behind their backs. Just kidding, kids, it's never good or right to talk about someone behind their back, even lawyers. You'll understand someday why your parents are smiling.

While there are many fine, respectable and honest lawyers, there is a reason why lawyers generally have the reputation they do. And it's not because of television and movies. The idea for those characters had to come from somewhere. It comes from the real world. Maybe some of you have had to deal with lawyers. Maybe you had a good and honest lawyer. Maybe you had to work with or be questioned by a rascal of a lawyer. But honest lawyer or rascal aside, they all ask questions. Lots of questions. And if you pay attention, you notice that they form their questions to get the answer they want, the answer that serves to prove their case.

Friends, that's exactly what we find today with this expert in the law, this Bible lawyer who stood up one day to discuss the Law with Jesus, i.e., the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. Now, there's nothing wrong with discussing the Law. The Law is a good thing. God made it. The Law of God shows us the beautiful ways in which we are called to live a life of love both for God and our neighbor. But as we see today, this lawyer came with false motives.

Luke tells us that this lawyer wanted to talk about the Law in order to test Jesus and justify himself. We see his attitude already in the way he addresses Jesus. He calls him *Teacher*. By calling him *Teacher* this lawyer acknowledges Jesus' wisdom, but notice that he puts Jesus on the same playing field as himself. In Jewish society there were different categories of people. The educated men generally became scribes, experts in the Law, or Rabbis, i.e., teachers. The lawyer puts Jesus to the test to see if this *Teacher* is as qualified as the people claim him to be. The lawyer questions Jesus in such a way as to get the answer he wants to hear.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus always has the perfect answer to every question, even when the question is a twisted and **wrong question**. Especially when dealing with the experts and teachers of the Law, Jesus answers by asking his own question. "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" Now the lawyer is being tested.

"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."

Does he get it right? He does, doesn't he? Jesus agreed, "You have answered correctly." We would agree with this too. We know that many of the ways we show love to God is by showing love to others. We all agree its good

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

to take care of poor people. We all agree that the Samaritan in Jesus' parable is a good example for us to follow. We also all agree that we wouldn't want to be like the robbers who left the man for dead, or even the priest or Levite who didn't stop to help.

Love God...love your neighbor. This is the Law. The lawyer knew it. We know it. God has written it on our hearts (Rom. 2:14-15). We know this is how we *should* be. This lawyer agreed with Jesus on what the Law said, but notice that he doesn't agree with Jesus on what the Law is supposed to do, what its purpose is.

The lawyer wants to use the Law unlawfully, and so do we. Like the lawyer, we ask the **wrong question**. We see the lawyer's problem at the beginning with his opening question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's such a strange question when you think of it, even apart from God's Word. He talks about inheriting something, but asks what he has to do to get it. The only way to inherit something is to be born to someone who has it and then wait for that person to die. To truly inherit something, it must be given. If you have to do something to get it, then it isn't an inheritance any longer but something earned.

Like this lawyer, all too often we mix up our doing with God's giving. When we do this, we have a big problem. The same problem as this lawyer. Then we're deaf to the law and its purpose like this lawyer. Jesus responded to him saying, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." This should have crushed this man's sinful heart. He should have seen that he doesn't perfectly love God or his neighbor. But this lawyer, with all his knowledge of what the Law says, fails to un-

derstand the purpose of the Law. "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

Do you see what his problem is? It's the same problem you and I have. He wants to justify his attitudes, behavior and actions, not ac-



According to God's holy Law, but according to his own standards. He's looking at God's Law, not through the eyes of faith and seeing the sinful nature slaying sword that it is, but as a true lawyer he looks through sinful eyes and sees nothing more than a guideline, trying to find all kinds of loopholes to get his

client off the hook. Namely, himself.

How often haven't we all made excuses for our sin, even finding imagined loopholes in God's Word to justify our sinful thoughts and actions? Like this lawyer, we try to use God's Law as guidebook to discover ways we can skip loving certain people or even trying to prove that some of our unloving actions, words and thoughts weren't really our fault and therefore shouldn't count against us. Then we're missing the point and purpose of the Law. Then we're asking the **wrong question**.

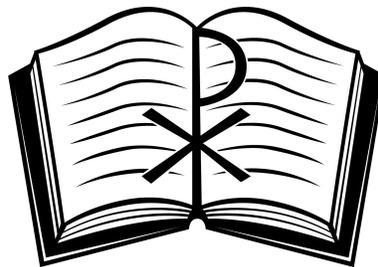
Jesus straightens out this man's question. Jesus' crushing law, "Do this and you will live" didn't hit home. So now he brings the full force of the Law with a parable, so that, like Nathan with King David, this lawyer would be self-condemned by giving **the right answer**.

With the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows us that the **wrong question** is to ask, "Who is my neighbor?" and that the right question to ask is, "To whom can I be a neighbor?" By doing this, Jesus moves us away from using the Law as a means to

prove ourselves right and just and toward seeing ourselves as wrong. Jesus shows us how we have not always been a neighbor to those in need. Think of how often our compassion has been so small. Think of the person you've walked past holding out a cup with a sign looking for some change from your pocket. Do you dig right into your pockets and give him whatever change you have in your pocket? Do you offer to buy him a burger? Or do you just pretend to not have seen him and grumble in your mind that he should get off his lazy rear and get a job?

Or what about someone you consider to be your enemy? What if you found out they were in need? Would you try to see if you could help them, or would you just let them be, maybe even find a little joy in the fact that they find themselves in need? Sometimes we can be just like the priest and Levite. When we see someone we figure doesn't fit in our circle of neighbors, we look the other way. We have no excuse. Jesus' question condemns us. "Who was a neighbor to this man?" The lawyer answered correctly. It was the foreigner, the half-breed, the stranger, it was the despised *Samaritan!*

We find ourselves right alongside the priest and Levite, condemned along with the lawyer. But friends, I hope you find yourself somewhere else in the parable too. And no, I'm not talking about the Samaritan. We'll get to that in a bit. You're also the man who was beaten, robbed and left for dead. You have been beaten, robbed and left for dead by life, the awful opinion of others, your own sin and Satan's attacks. Nobody has ever been a perfect neighbor to you. That is, except for Jesus.



While we along with the lawyer ask the **wrong question**, Jesus is able to produce the **right answer** because *he is* the answer. Friends, I hope you see that Jesus is the Good Samaritan who has compassion on us. He isn't just an example for us to follow. Our love flows from God first loving us. But so many get this wrong, just like the lawyer. They like to use this parable and so much of Scripture to moralize.

Now what does it mean to moralize? The best place to look is your own sinful heart. But to see a good example all you have to do is look at Santa Claus—do good things to get good gifts. Or you could watch almost any Veggie Tales movie. They're loaded with that same thinking. Moralizing basically takes all of God's Word and turns it into law. Like the lawyer, moralizing confuses the purpose of the law and thereby destroys the joy and purpose of the Gospel. In moralizing, the law is turned into something I do to make God happy and get his love. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" But if you use the law to get the gospel, well then you've abused the law and don't have the gospel any longer (Rom. 11:6). You don't have the free gift of God's grace if you try and earn it.

In Jesus' parables, one of the main characters is him or God the Father, and we find ourselves in another character. I think it's pretty clear that Jesus is the Good Samaritan, even to English readers. But there is a word in the original Greek that tells us even more. Jesus tells us that the Samaritan "took pity on" the man who had been robbed and beaten. That phrase is one word in the Greek and is a word that is used in the Gospels exclusively in connection with Jesus or a character in a parable who represents God the Father or God the Son.

While to a point you could say that Jesus is an example for us in what a perfect life of love looks like, that's not Jesus' main purpose. First and foremost, Jesus is our compassionate Savior. That was the problem with the whole "What Would Jesus Do?" fad from a few years back. It asks the wrong question. The right question is "What Did Jesus Do?" We don't live our lives as Christians wondering what Jesus would do in every situation or as though he was standing right there watching us (which he is anyways). That would be living our lives with the motivator being the law, not the gospel. It is the gospel which motivates us (2 Cor. 5:14). It is recognizing what Jesus has done for me as my Good Samaritan that motivates me to want to thank him with a life of love.

And just how has Jesus been the perfect Good Samaritan to you? He, the true foreigner, has come to you, each one of you, beaten up by your sin and the devil and left for dead and expecting only eternal death. He has come to you, individually, and brought you healing through Holy Baptism. He has given you shelter and care through the Holy Christian Church on earth as the Gospel has been administered to you in both Word and Holy Communion.

Jesus has proven that he is the perfect neighbor. He does not pass anyone by. The proof of his compassion is seen in his perfect life he lived as the ultimate foreigner in this world. He lovingly served all and sacrificed himself on the cross, all so that he could pay for what it would take to nurse us all to spiritual life and eternal life. Even as our risen and ascended Lord, he still has compassion on us to this very day. He does this day in and day

out by not asking us what we have done to gain life, but every day telling us what *he* has done to give us eternal life as our inheritance.

Friends, while we may ask the **wrong questions**, Jesus leads us with his love to condemn our sinful hearts with his law and heal our sin-sick souls with his gospel so that in the end we would have **the right answer**. Jesus points us to himself and that he's done it all for us. He is the answer! Then, and only then, does Jesus say, "Go, and do likewise." Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.