

“Love Your Neighbor As Yourself”

Luke 10:25-37

The expert in the law asked Jesus the question that seems to always be on the mind of those sitting on the fringe of God’s church: “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The man who asked this question knew the answer, and it was the right answer. But it was really the wrong question to ask. He asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He should have asked, “What has *God* done that I may inherit eternal life?”

But this fellow who was talking to Jesus did not want to know what God does in our lives; he wanted to know what he needed to do to save himself. He clearly demonstrates that he already knew the answer: “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.” It sounds easy enough, doesn’t it? Well, hardly.

In order to fulfill what God demands of us, we would need to be perfect in every way. We would need to treat every person that we meet in the same way that the Good Samaritan treated the man on the roadside. In order to inherit eternal life through the Law, we could never have a bad thought about another person. We could never keep any of our worldly possessions as long as there was someone

else who was in need. And this perfect lifestyle would have to be maintained for our entire lifetime.

There have been people throughout the history of the Christian church who have thought that this was possible. They thought that they could keep all of God's Law. Several hundred years after Jesus had risen from the dead, there was a prominent pastor named Pelagius. Pelagius correctly taught his followers that God's forgiveness was offered in Baptism. At Baptism, our sins were completely wiped clean through the water and the Word. That part he had right.

But then Pelagius also taught that Baptism was the only time that our sins were forgiven, and that from the time of your Baptism, each person needed to maintain a sinless life in order to inherit eternal life. He believed and he taught that this could be done.

However, not surprisingly, many of his followers despaired because they thought that it was impossible for them to be saved. And in their despair, they gave up hope of their own salvation, but wanted their children to inherit eternal life. So most of them withheld Baptism from their children so that they could be baptized when it seemed their death was near and supposedly had no more chance to sin. And some of them went so far, that after they baptized their child, they immediately killed their child so as to insure salvation.

These people called themselves Christians, but they had completely missed the message of the Gospel. They had completely missed the message of God's forgiveness brought through faith in Christ's suffering and death on the cross and His resurrection from the

grave. The joy that we experience in our Baptism was unknown to them because the grace of God was unknown to them. They placed their hope for salvation and eternal life in their own actions, in their own works.

We will inherit eternal life, but not because we are such good people, or have kept God's commands. We have done absolutely nothing to deserve the mercy and forgiveness that God has shown to us. We will inherit eternal life because the Holy Spirit called us to faith in our Baptism, and because the Holy Spirit daily, continually brings us the message that through the blood of Christ our sins have been forgiven.

You are now a child of God solely by God's grace shown to you in Baptism. You will inherit eternal life only through the Holy Spirit sustaining you in faith through the hearing of God's Word and the receiving of Christ's Body and Blood at the Lord's Table.

We see how it is God, and God alone, who has brought about a fundamental change in His people. We were dead in our sins; we are now alive in Christ. And now because the Lord has first forgiven us, because He first loved us, He now says: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The only reason that we are able to show any love toward our neighbor is because we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. The good works that we perform do not earn ourselves points toward eternal life. The good works that we do are thank offerings for the forgiveness of sins, which we have already received in faith.

We forgive each other and are kind to each other because of our love for God, because He showed mercy, kindness, and forgiveness to us first. God wants us to live a life of pureness and holiness, but we can never live up to the expectations that the Law demands of us. However that does not mean that we give up and say “Why bother even trying? After all, we are forgiven, so let’s do what we want to do.”

Christ not only teaches us to put our faith and trust in Him, but He also encourages a life of good deeds, kind actions, and forgiveness. And that is what the story of the Good Samaritan is all about. This is not just the story of one man helping another. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. The Jews hated the Samaritans more than they hated the Romans and vice versa. This story is first and foremost a story of forgiveness. Before the Good Samaritan did any kind deed, he needed to forgive this Jew, this ancestral enemy of the Samaritans. It was unheard of for Samaritans and Jews to even speak to one another, let alone in kindness, and let alone show the mercy that this man did.

Jesus says to each of us: “Although you are not saved through your good works, you can learn from the forgiveness and kindness of the Good Samaritan. God has been merciful to you. God has shown kindness to you. God has forgiven you. Go and do likewise.” Amen.