

The Parable of Jesus

Luke 10:24-37 (ESV)

Dear saints of St. John's,

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of God for today is the Gospel text, with these verses for meditation, **“But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”**

Let us pray,

May the Words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. Maybe a familiar story from Jesus concerning true mercy and compassion. Where do we get this title “Good Samaritan”? He is only ever addressed as a “Samaritan”; or the one who had compassion; or the one who showed mercy. How is he “good”? Well, look who he is compared to. Compared to the priest or the Levite, he is the true neighbor. The one who took care to notice and love the half-dead man is “good” while the passer-bys should be judged “bad.” The Samaritan is the one who the Scriptures would say, “he loved his neighbor as himself.” In this act of mercy, the Samaritan is the one who has lived from the Law. The one outside the Law of the Israelites, outside the covenant with God, has outdone the ones who regularly study the Law. Is the Good Samaritan meant to only be an example that shames us for our cold, unmerciful hearts? Do we think like that lawyer, “If only I knew who to love, then everything would be fine, then I am on track to inherit eternal life”?

No, there is more to this story. Yes, the example of the Good Samaritan might shame you for your lack of love towards your neighbor. But, in fact, this story, the interaction between Jesus and the lawyer, and Jesus’ introduction shows that everything in our Gospel text concerns Jesus. And it’s not just like a Sunday school answer, where we ask a question and the answer is “Jesus!”. If we want to understand who Jesus is, why he answered the lawyer with this story, and how we must apply the “Good Samaritan parable” to our lives, then we find that it truly is all about Jesus.

The text for today begins with Jesus’ private words to his disciples, **“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”** Our Lord makes it very plain, “because you follow me, see my miracles, hear my teaching, you are experiencing everything God promised about His Savior.” Jesus is not another regular Rabbi, or another prophet of God. He is the one prophesied of in many times and in various ways throughout all of God’s oracles to his people. The prophets and kings, who spoke of this Christ to come, longed and ardently desired to see Jesus! Thus the disciples who walked and talked with Jesus, and you who receive Jesus’ gifts today, can truly be called “blessed,” “fortunate,” and “satisfied.”

What did they desire to see of the Christ? They desired to see the salvation of man. They desired to see how death and the devil would be vanquished by the cross.

They desired to see how the love of God would be shown to man through this suffering. They desired to see God and man brought together to live forever in each other's presence. They desired to see all of this.

Opposed to this reception of Jesus, receiving him as the one promised to save His people from their sins, are those who think Jesus was just another Law-giver. They think that God gave the Israelites the covenant at Mt Sinai which showed them how to live, which showed them how to inherit eternal life. This is the thinking of the lawyer. His job title "lawyer," really means an expert in the Law of Moses, in God's Word. If this expert in the Law was to hear what Jesus had told his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see," he would think Jesus is crazy. He'd think, "This is silly. Yes Jesus, you're a great teacher, maybe the best. You have a lot of good insights into loving God and loving one's neighbor. But, you're not that special; you're no use to me. I have already figured that out myself." This expert has a real struggle. If he admits Jesus is here for a bigger reason than just teaching how to fulfill the Law, then the expert would have to admit there was something truly wrong with himself. He would have to admit there was not enough strength and power within himself to be a good person, to live a good life in the sight of God. This can be a frightening thing: being frank with yourself that you have failed and you will fail.

The expert in the Law gets Jesus all wrong and he should have known better. The covenant God gave to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai was never meant to make oneself good, never meant to inherit eternal life. The promise, that God would send his Son into the world to save the world from its sin, was given to Abraham in 1800 BC. This was the most important relationship God had with his people. He promised them a Savior. 400 years later God spoke to his people after the Exodus, giving them the Law at Mt. Sinai. This Law was given for two reasons. First, as St. Paul says, "it was added because of transgressions." It was added so that God's Word might imprison everyone under sin and that all might believe in the promise of the forgiveness of sins by Jesus' blood. Second, the Law was given so that the Israelites might know how they should live as God's chosen people. This Law would be a guide for their daily struggle in holy living to the people who knew that it was not their own job to make themselves good, but to believe in the Savior who was to do that.

Let this be a reminder to you: there is no point of Jesus coming into the world, dying by crucifixion, and coming to life again if you could have made yourself good in God's sight. You cannot base your self-esteem and worth before God upon how well you measure up. It might seem obvious to you. This is what has been sounded forth from this pulpit your whole life, or this is the topic of Bible Study over and over. But, the sin within us longs to justify itself, longs to think its self-worth is in how good it can be. At the same time, you hear often of Christians living their life hiding shame and guilt, orienting their whole life around keeping good appearances, when things are in trouble. Instead of confessing one's sins before God and others, admitting to others where one has fallen, and showing that often one can't do everything alone, these Christians bottle everything up and seek no help. They ruin themselves instead of facing temporal shame knowing that God's favor cannot change. It is in these difficulties where you must know that God measures you good all because of how good Jesus is. You can ask for help, not fearing to measure short, since God has and will regard you perfect.

The expert in the Law did not understand who Jesus was and what he came to do. That is shameful enough. On top of that, the task he was trying to work on, to love God

and to love his neighbor, he completely missed. The cause? His attempt to make himself good made his heart blind to showing true mercy. We see this in the expert's reaction to Jesus's question. The expert in the Law asks, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" Our Lord points the question back to him, since he is supposed to be the expert in the Law. The expert answers correctly: "**love God and love neighbor**". Yet, he can't just leave it there. How could you possibly love everyone? There are a lot of evil people in this world. Could you care for them too? Especially if this is the measurement for eternal life. So the expert of the Law asks, "Yes, but *who* is my neighbor?" With this question he can make that term "neighbor" a lot more manageable for his sake. Be honest with yourself; this is common to all human hearts. "Maybe I don't have to count *that* person who lives right next to me. He never leaves his house anyways. Or maybe I don't have to count my sister who is nothing but a pain in my parent's side." Thus the law-fulfiller, the one who is trying to make himself good, fails in the end. He has to ignore many opportunities for love and mercy because his ability is too weak to truly love all his neighbors.

Jesus indeed makes it hard for this expert in the Law. Instead of answering, "only the people you really like," he answers with the Good Samaritan parable, "*everyone*, even your enemies." The Good Samaritan is commended, is honored, for showing love and mercy even to his enemy the Jew. Even though the half-dead man wouldn't talk to his savior in any other circumstance, the man who was saved has to admit that his enemy, the Good Samaritan, was a better neighbor than his brethren the priest or the Levite. Thus our Lord shows the expert that the bar needs to keep moving up and up, not the other way around.

Here is where we notice the difference between the expert who was trying to justify himself, and you and me, those justified by the blood of Jesus. The expert had bound himself to make himself good, and failed miserably because not only was he trying to do the wrong thing, he even failed to meet that wrong goal. Your outlook is different according to your life in Christ. Since you are justified by the blood of Jesus, you are made to be good; you know there is no self-imposed requirement. You have the freedom to show mercy. You can be like that Good Samaritan. You can disregard what others might think of you, the dangers of spending your own money, the time and effort it might take because all that you need has been covered by the blood of Jesus. This freedom then is much different than a cold exacting harshness of the one who tries to make himself good. This freedom to love actually does the work, while the one trying to do the work fails. This freedom gives you confidence to let the law of mercy rule your life. Not every situation might be as obvious as a half-dead man on the side of the road, but there will be opportunities to be the neighbor to *everyone* you come across.

This work accomplished, the mercy of the true neighbor, sets a high bar of love. When you compare yourself to the Samaritan, it can be hard to see yourself as a true neighbor. Who is always this fervent in love? Who has never felt cold or sluggish in this regard? Who does not become weary of generosity when he is approached by poor people? Who does not grow tired of being charitable when he often sees he has distributed his money in vain? Who does not think about stopping his donations when he finds people repaying his goodness with shameful ingratitude? Who does not sometimes wonder why he should continue to forgive and reconcile when a person always offends and provokes? None of us!

Only one was able to show this kind of love - Jesus Christ. Truly he is the fulfillment of this parable. What our Lord describes as a character in a story, has become for you reality. When you were past the point of "half-dead," when you were completely dead in your sins, Christ saw you. Unlike those who passed by, our Lord had compassion. He said, "Aha! There is my brother lying in shame and danger. Let me take care of him. Even though he wouldn't do the same for me, it is worth my sacrifice!" His heart turned toward you. Out of his pity, he came to you and bound up your wounds in the bandages of love. He poured on you the oil and wine of the Gospel. With the forgiveness of sins, he replaced your death with the fullness of life. Jesus laid you on his animal and brought you to the inn of recovery - this congregation. Here your wounds continue to be looked after until the Good Samaritan returns for good. Within this inn, everything provided for you comes from the work and payment of this Jesus Christ. He has given the two denarii as a pledge, his Word and his Sacraments, with all his merit on the cross as security. When Jesus returns you will be made whole and ready to serve him in life everlasting.

See, this Gospel text is all about Jesus. Not only does the parable concern the work of Jesus; not only does it remind you of his compassion when he had pity on us; it also shows you how lacking a life is lived if one depends upon making himself good. Without the work of Christ, you would be left as the expert in the Law. You would be left to keep lowering the bar of "good." You would be left to a cold heart which has bound itself from going out of its way to show love. Now, since you have been given mercy, you have had mercy poured into your hearts overflowing with full abundance, you are able little by little, to pour that same mercy out on others. Your cup overflows. Each and every Sunday it is a bottomless cup of God's compassion. Let some of that be poured into the cup of your neighbor. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.