

“THE GOOD SAMARITAN”

Luke 10:25-37

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“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question sounds a great deal like one I used to hear in my youth. Perhaps, someone has asked it of you as well. “Are you saved?” I haven’t heard it in a long time, perhaps because a certain kind of evangelical (the sort who asks this question) has given up hope on mainstream protestant pastors. Ironically most mainstream pastors consider themselves evangelical in the original sense of that word as one who has good news to share. Sharing good news is our primary task as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ.

Life-long church-goers often find this question awkward. “Are you saved?” is shorthand for “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and received God’s forgiveness through Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the cross.” The easiest thing to do is to just say, “yes.” But before long, you realize that you’re have a conversation that is somewhat like parallel play. You might be using the same toys, the same words, but meaning very different things by them.

If you say “no,” then you have to brace yourself for “bad news” because you will never embrace your questioner’s understanding of salvation. The theological conversation you’re engaged in will result in the news that you’re on a one-way trip to hell. In fairness to these kinds of evangelicals, they are not just interested in this “entrance into heaven” requirement. They are concerned about the way Christians conduct themselves in this life as well. Sadly, their views in this area are also structured around a set of rules, a black and white understanding of the world that rejects what many mainstream Christians believe. I don’t have many conversations with evangelicals, but when I do, it feels like a test that I better have the right answers to if I want to avoid the bad news sure to follow.

A lawyer stands up to test Jesus. “What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to be saved?” He seems to be asking about the entrance requirements into heaven. The problem for Jesus is the same as the challenge faced by the church-goer in answering the evangelical question. Jesus doesn’t equate “eternal life” with “heaven,” just as many Christians don’t limit salvation to an “entrance exam.” But Jesus is smarter than most of us. He turns the question back to the lawyer. He asks him to define his terms. “What do you read in the law? What do you mean by saved?”

The lawyer passes the test. He gives the right answer: love of God and love of neighbor. “Do this and you will live,” says Jesus. Notice that he doesn’t repeat the lawyer’s terms. “Eternal life” is not equated with some heaven we get into beyond death. It is the same as “life” and one enters it in this life. The death of our bodies is irrelevant to participation in God’s work. It does not mark a transition. The transition begins now or not at all.

Notice how the lawyer has fallen into Jesus' trap. The lawyer thinks he was asking about his relationship to God, but in his answer he sees that his relationship to God is inseparable from his relationship to other people. But he doesn't give up. "Wanting to justify himself, he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Too many Christians limit their understanding of salvation to their relationship to God. They think we have to love God first and then we can love our neighbor. Good works will follow faith. The law says, and Jesus affirms that love of God and love of neighbor are more closely tied together than that. One doesn't follow from the other, but they interact in a much more dynamic fashion. First John asks, "How can we love God whom we cannot see, if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we can see?"

"Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer hopes that Jesus will sufficiently limit this so that he can pass the test. Instead, Jesus disappoints him. He tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

You know the story. A man is robbed and beaten and left half dead on the road. A priest and a Levite pass by. A Samaritan stops, mends up the wounds, and sees to his recovery. Here are two people respected in the faith who fail to see the victim as their responsibility, who fail to recognize him as their neighbor. Here is one person with a hybrid faith, unacceptable to the religious mainstream, who takes responsibility for the victim.

It's important to notice how Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's question. Instead he shifts the perspective from defining the neighbor to being the neighbor. The neighbor is the one who shows mercy, who has compassion, who loves. This same shift takes place when we read the whole law which is to love your neighbor as yourself or in other words to see yourself in the neighbor. Neither of these great commandments can be fulfilled by treating them as rules that we observe and check off a list. Loving God involves the investment of your whole self. Loving neighbor involves seeing yourself in others.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus doesn't give an answer as much as he shows us the answer in this parable. Those who are alive are those who see the victims, but it's not just seeing the victim, but how we see the victim. The priest and the Levite see the man beaten on the road. Do they avoid him because he might be dead and touching him would make them unclean as many have suggested? Could we say that they see the man as one who might compromise their relationship with God? Do they see the man as one who might inconvenience them interrupting the important things they needed to accomplish?

How do we see the victims of today? Five million Americans have been infected by the virus. Over 170,000 have died. A disproportionate number of them have been black and Latino. Do we see them as careless communities who deserve their fate or as victims of social inequities that have placed them in more vulnerable circumstances? Do we walk by or take responsibility?

For years the church walked by victims of domestic violence, thinking they were defending the sanctity of marriage. For decades we have walked by families victimized by gun violence labeling this a political issue that the church had no business sticking its nose in. For centuries we have excluded the LGBTQ+ community from leadership in our congregations in the name of preserving moral purity.

What do we see when we come upon the man half-dead in the road? How we answer that reveals whether we are alive or half-dead ourselves, whether we are saved or not, whether we are a neighbor or not. It reveals whether we are interested in listening to Jesus or only in justifying ourselves.

We spend a lot of time justifying ourselves as we offer rationalizations for the unconscionable practice of imprisoning vast numbers of people, most of them minorities receiving longer sentences for the same crimes committed by just as many white people. When you see a strange black man on the street, do you see a neighbor or a potential threat? When you see a young protestor holding up a sign that says “Black Live Matter,” do you see a person advocating for special treatment or a person reminding us to respect a group of people that we haven’t valued much in the past?

I’m not suggesting that we have to agree on all the controversial issues of the day, that we should be a soft-sell for anyone approaching us with a need. I’m suggesting quite the opposite in fact, that we stop, look closely, bind up the wounds, and involve others in the care process. It would be easy to just give the homeless woman a dollar, but to really see her would be to see one with wounds that go much deeper than that. We can give thanks that many Samaritans have taken a closer look and are experiencing a new life as they bind up these wounds and recruit advocates to address the roots of homelessness. Sadly, we are still waiting for enough neighbors with the skills and the means to dress the wounds of those without a home.

How we see the homeless woman, the bullied child, the unemployed worker, the struggling business owner, the man with terminal cancer, the isolated child and the fearful teacher will decide whether we stop or pass by on the other side. The parable tells us that a lot of “good people” walk by, while some unsavory people stop to help. If you want to be in relationship with God, you will not be able to count on your goodness. If you want to be a participant in the kingdom of God, you need to have the eyes that see the wounded, and the commitment to be a neighbor. To have eternal life is not to have the right answers that open the pearly gates. It is to infuse this life with a love for God and a love for one’s neighbor. It is not about singing with the heavenly choir, but about delivering good news to the wounded. Salvation is not about being welcomed into God’s elite and chosen few, but about recognizing the humanity in yourself and the humanity in others. To live the full life is to exercise mercy. It is to be the bearer and the embodiment of good news.

So I ask you, “Are you saved?” Are you interested in eternal life? Stop and take a close look at the wounded of this world. Don’t worry that they will only distract you from your goals in life. Don’t be afraid that they will distract you from your religious practices. Jesus

spent his whole ministry seeing and tending the wounded. He saw himself as a neighbor responsible for those he shared his life with. Forget about the formulas, saying the right prayers, practicing your righteousness before others. For Jesus, life is not a test. It's the real thing. So if you want to be saved, to live the full life, well, go and do likewise. Be the one who sees the wounded. Be the one who shows mercy. Be the one who heals the injured. Be the one who gathers the community for the sake of those in need. Be the one who stands with the oppressed. Be the one who delivers the good news. Be the neighbor who exercises the gifts of God for the benefit of others. Keep your eyes open and your heart attuned to the compassion of God.

Amen.