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Luke 10:25-37

WHAT DOES THE STORY OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN SAY TO US?

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Have you ever heard of the Good Samaritan? I'm sure that you have. People who study the Scriptures know immediately that it is a story that our Lord Jesus told in the Gospel of St. Luke. But even if you never picked up a Bible before, you have probably heard the phrase "Good Samaritan." Here in Michigan we have a Good Samaritan Hospital and Good Samaritan medical clinics. There are Good Samaritan ministries and Good Samaritan societies. There is a Good Samaritan Lutheran Church and lawyers deal with Good Samaritan laws. It is both one of the best known and most misunderstood stories that our Lord Jesus tells. This morning we get to the very heart of the matter answering the question: WHAT DOES THE STORY OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN SAY TO US?

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He set his face to go there. Nothing was going to deter him. Nothing was going to stop him. He was going there for one purpose: he was going to suffer and die for the sin of the world. He was going to be crucified and then he was going to rise again on the third day. He would take our sin and he would give us the perfect righteousness that we need to stand before God. Only our Lord could do what had to be done. It was the only way that we could be saved.

We really don't want to believe that, do we? Our natural feeling is that we have to earn our salvation or at least contribute in part. We think that there is something that we can do and must do to get right with God. Surely there is something that I can do to gain God's favor. Surely there is something that I can do so that God will welcome me into heaven with open arms, praising me for my obedience. It sounds so good. We see people of every stripe and religion trying to get themselves right by doing certain things or by abstaining from certain things. It won't work. Jesus shows that brilliantly.

We know that there were many people who did not like Jesus and did not trust Jesus. They considered him a fraud and deceiver of the people. They looked for ways to trap him and find something in his statements so that they could arrest him and ultimately put him to death. Jesus would have any number of run-ins with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These were people who you would describe as very religious, very studious in their study of the Scriptures. Every day they debated the finer points of the Law in the temple courts. Ten Commandments weren't good enough for them. They had 613 commandments, 248 positive and 365 negative. They debated which of them were the most important. They looked down on most others, including and especially Jesus.

Now one of these men, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. The same phrase is used in the temptation of Jesus by Satan. This man did not have pure motives. He really wasn't interested in getting the right answer from Jesus. His question sounds innocent enough: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

We don't know exactly what he was thinking. Did he feel that he had indeed kept the law? Did he really want to know if he had missed something? Was he looking merely to trap Jesus? Did he honestly value Jesus' opinion? Did he think that he could make Jesus look foolish in front of all his friends? Jesus answers his question with another question. He throws it right back in the lawyer's face. "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The ball is now in his

court. He is now on the defensive. He claims to be an expert in the Law. He claimed to know it well. He had to answer or he would look foolish.

He would give the answer. It would be the same one that you or I would hopefully give. "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." He correctly understood that the entire law can be condensed into a single word: "Love." Love is the fulfillment of the Law.

Yes, love is the fulfillment of the Law. We see that running through every commandment. Jesus then replies, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live!" The verb really emphasizes: "Keep on doing this and you will live!" What does the Law demand? If we want to get right with God on our own merits then we must show perfect love toward God and toward our fellow man every day, every minute, every second of our lives without slipping into sin. Just one sin, just one slip up anywhere in our lives means that we have failed to live up to the demands of the law. The words of Jesus should remind us that living up to the Law's demands is an impossible task. None of us can live up to that demand. We have all failed.

The Law always accuses. Trying to live by the Law will bring one of two responses. Either we will be led to despair knowing that we have not lived up to the Law's demands and therefore are in need of help (like a Savior sent from heaven) or we will believe that we actually have met the Law's demands and earned eternal life on our own. The lawyer certainly wanted to fall into this category.

The lawyer now is on the defensive. He starts to squirm. He thought that he had known the Law so well. He thought that he had kept it, at least better than most of the Jews and all of the Gentiles. He knows that if he loved God, he must love his neighbor as well. To profess love for God but not for his neighbor is hypocrisy and it is sin. He doesn't like where this seems to be heading. He tries to deflect things by implying that the Law itself is the problem. The Law is unclear. So he asks another question: "And who is my neighbor?"

By asking this question, the man implies that there are people who may not be or definitely are not his neighbor. He asks Jesus to interpret the Torah and tell him what kinds of people would be excluded from that love. We like to shape the law to our own liking. We don't want to show love to people that we feel don't deserve our love. The Pharisees would certainly exclude many in their definition of the word "neighbor." They would exclude those who didn't take time to study the Law as they did. They would exclude "sinners" like tax collectors who worked for the Roman government. They would certainly exclude Samaritans, the half-breeds who lived in what once was the northern Kingdom of Israel. And the Gentiles? Don't even get started with them. Who would be most worthy of love and being called "neighbor?" Good people like priests and Levites.

That is why Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan would shock and offend this lawyer. Nobody is playing the roles that the lawyer expected them to play. The priest and the Levite and the models of indifferent, unmerciful and loveless behavior and the Samaritan, the hated half-breed comes off as the hero of the story. The man and his friends would not like how this story plays out. If Jesus had told the story about a noble Jew who helped a hated Samaritan, the lawyer may have accepted this, but not a Samaritan who helped a Jew.

The story is familiar. A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was accosted by robbers, beaten, stripped of his clothing and left for dead. I've seen the Jericho road. It is a distance of 17 miles and begins with making a descent from Jerusalem at 2500 feet above sea level to 800 feet below sea level. There were all kinds of places where robbers could hide. This man was not the first to be robbed there and he would not be the last. He could do absolutely

nothing. He could not walk. He could not crawl. He couldn't even call for help. Surely this man's situation was one that would arouse sympathy and compassion. Or would it?

We see that a priest was the first to come by. This was a man who offered sacrifices in the very house of God, a man who knew the Law very well. Yet he did nothing. He simply passed by on the other side of the road. Then came a Levite, a person whose position today might be similar to a church council member. He did nothing as well. It is interesting that Jesus said nothing about their reasons for neglecting this man. Does it really matter? They felt in their own minds that they had good reasons, acceptable reasons for doing nothing. They were motivated by the thought, "If I stop to help, what will happen to me?" The next man was motivated by the thought, "If I don't stop and help, what will happen to him?"

What about you? As you hear about the priest and the Levite, are you filled with righteous anger and indignation? Do you wonder how they could be so loveless? Or do you see yourself in this story? Do you see the Law accusing you? Do you think back on opportunities that you missed? You pretended that you didn't see something, hear something. You hoped that no one would notice. Yes, there was that elderly lady on the block, the troubled girl at work, your son, your spouse, the person you saw stranded on the highway. You had reasons. You were tired. You were busy. You simply didn't want to help at this time. Someone else can do it!

But the Samaritan, the outcast, the unwanted enemy, is the one who will do whatever it took. He had compassion on this man. He took care of this man's wounds and he puts the man on his own animal and takes him to the inn, spending his own money to take care of him, taking the equivalent of two months wages and then tells the innkeeper, "If you need more than that, I'll take care of it." It cost this man time, effort, money, sleep, delay of plans and whatever else, but he doesn't mind. Love and compassion compel him to do this.

The lawyer gives the correct answer to Jesus' next question: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer answers, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus then says, "Go and do likewise!"

Which question has Jesus answered? "Who is my neighbor?" or "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Is Jesus merely telling this man that there are all kinds of opportunities to help other people and that we should keep our eyes open to them? That may be true, but there is more. We are the injured man lying on the side of the road. By nature we are spiritually blind, dead and enemies of God. We cannot move, crawl or shout for help. Satan has robbed us. But Jesus the despised Samaritan had compassion on you. He brought you back to life by the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism. He paid your debts with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He strengthens you through his very body and blood in his holy Supper. He has taken care of your every need and will bring you safely home to heaven. As he lives in us, he gives us the ability to be merciful and loving. We love because he loved us. See the one who loved you! See your neighbor in need! Go and do likewise! AMEN.