

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Luke 10:23-37: “How Do You Read the Law?”
August 29, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Dear Father in heaven, we thank You that You have sent us a Savior, Your Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem us from our sin and the punishment we justly deserved.... Grant us grace to accept His redemption with a true heart, and by Your Holy Spirit enable us to bring forth the fruits of gratitude to You... in love toward You and to our neighbor, and in all things to follow the example of our Good Samaritan, our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we ask it. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, CPH 2009, p. 508)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Then turning to the disciples [Jesus] said privately, “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.” / And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” / He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” / And he answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” / And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” / But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” / Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ / “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” / He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” / And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who taught us the way of compassion and mercy by giving Himself fully for the needs of His neighbors, dear fellow redeemed:

In the summertime, parents can be a little more lenient with their kids. With no bus to catch in the morning, they might let the kids sleep in a bit. With no homework to do or school deadlines to meet, kids have more flexibility with how they spend their time. But school is back in session. That means it's time to buckle down again.

When school starts, parents become less accepting of non-committal answers. When they see their kids lounging around and wasting time, and they ask, "Is your homework finished?" they are not looking for an "almost," or "it won't take me long." What they want to know is whether the homework is "done" or "not done." When it comes to homework, those are the only two categories!

They are the same two categories that apply to God's holy Law. God's Law is either done or not done. Today's reading tells us about an expert in the Law who seemed to recognize that his keeping of the Law was not done. He asked Jesus, "*Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" Then at Jesus' prompting, he summarized the Ten Commandments: You shall love God perfectly and your neighbor as yourself. "*You have answered correctly,*" said Jesus, "*do this, and you will live.*"

Then we learn that the expert in the Law thought he actually had done what was required. He thought he was holy according to God's Commandments. But he wasn't. He might have understood the Law intellectually, but he did not know the Law spiritually. He might have appeared to keep the Law outwardly, but he had not kept it in his heart.

How we read the Law is very important. We don't want to misunderstand it, and we don't want to misapply it. Jesus' interaction with the lawyer shows how easily both things can happen. You and I have something in common with this lawyer – we know what God demands in His Law. We know the Ten Commandments. There is another thing we have in common with this man. We think we have done a fair job of keeping the Commandments. We know we have not kept them perfectly, but compared to a lot of people around us, we think we have done pretty well at living the way God wants.

But this comparison with others is where we get into trouble. It shows a misunderstanding of the Law. When we think we have done better than others, we have actually set aside the Law. Remember that God's Law is either done or not done. If we haven't kept it fully, then there's no use pointing out how we are better than others. That's like boasting about a second-to-last finish in a field of a hundred competitors. And if we misunderstand our own failure to keep the Law, we will certainly misapply it. We will read it as though it condemns the sins of others while letting us off the hook.

The Law doesn't let anyone off the hook. St. Paul couldn't have said it more clearly in his letter to the Romans: "*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin*" (3:20). He wrote the same thing in his letter to the Galatians: "*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'* Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law" (Gal. 3:10-11).

The primary job of the Law is to smash the pride that is constantly rearing its ugly head inside us. The Law functions kind of like those robbers lurking in the shadows. We walk along, thinking we've got it together. We find it easy to justify our sinful actions, words, and thoughts, and we are quick to judge the weaknesses of others. We are focused on ourselves and not on the needs of those around us.

And BOOM! the Law hits us. We often don't see it coming. Suddenly our sin catches up to us, and we realize how flawed we really are. We see how lacking we are in love. We see how we have been living for ourselves and not for God. The Law knocks us flat on our backs and strips away everything we place our trust in in this life – our works, our accomplishments, our status. Nothing is left but our sins. The Law is ruthless. It shows no mercy. It gives no hope.

Suppose the Law had done its work, and you shared your guilt with a friend, laying bare all the ugly thoughts and intentions of your sinful heart. And your well-meaning friend tries to encourage you, "You are being too hard on yourself! You are a wonderful, good, kind person! You are one of the best!" That's like a priest or a Levite seeing the man half-dead and passing by on the other side because "he's going to be just fine!" Fluffy compliments or rosy sentiments are no help. When your eyes are open to your sin, when the Law shows you how you really are, you don't need someone telling you that everything is okay.

What you need is a Good Samaritan. You need someone to bind up your wounds, carry you to safety, and nurse you back to health. That's what Jesus does. He sees you in your sin, broken by the Law, and He has compassion on you. He knows what bad shape you and all sinners are in. That's why He took on your flesh. He came "*to redeem those who were under the law*" (Gal. 4:5). He came to do what you are incapable of doing. He came to fulfill the Law.

The Law didn't catch Him by surprise. It didn't knock Him down. The Law is His. God established the Law as a reflection of His perfect nature. He gave it to show what it means to be right with Him. And before the first man and woman sinned, they were right with Him. Their lives perfectly conformed to His holy will. But their sin ruined that Paradise. Now nothing they tried to do was perfect. Everything was tainted by sin.

Jesus came to reverse and repair all that. He lived His life in total conformity to the Law. He was tempted in every way just as we are, but He never sinned (Heb. 4:15). He perfectly loved His heavenly Father with all His heart, soul, strength, and mind, and He perfectly loved His neighbor as Himself. He lived that life of perfect love for you. He kept the Law completely for you. His holy life is yours – credited to you – by faith.

And He went to the cross to make atonement for your all sins against the holy Law. Every infraction, large and small, was counted against Him on the cross. All your arrogance, all your pride, your judgmental attitude toward others, your denial of your own sinfulness, your failure to help a neighbor in need – Jesus accepted the full wrath of God for all of it. The blood He shed cleanses you from every sin. Each and every sin is forgiven.

But you might not always feel like your sins are forgiven. You might still feel guilty for the things you have done and said and the terrible things you have imagined. This is why Jesus gives His Word and Sacraments. These are the means for your healing and strength. Through His Word of Absolution, Jesus returns you to the cleansing waters of your Baptism, where the wounds of your sins are washed clean. And through the food and drink of His Supper, He applies the medicine of His body and blood to bring you spiritual healing and strength.

Jesus sees how you struggle. He knows the countless ways you have fallen short of the Commandments. But He does not leave you for dead on the treacherous highway of this life. He has compassion on you. He has compassion because His love is not fickle like ours is. His love does not change or diminish. His love is perfect.

That perfect love counts as your keeping of the holy Law. All that He is and all that He accomplished is yours by faith. By faith in Him, the Law is done for you. It is fulfilled. That's what Romans 10:4 tells us: *"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."* We no longer have the pressure of trying to be righteous through our works. Perfect righteousness is ours by faith.

But while the Law is done for us before God, there is plenty for us to do for our neighbors. There are so many around us beaten and broken by their own sin and the sin of others. There are so many crushed by the Law and feeling despair. Our neighbors don't need priests and Levites who turn up their noses at the thought of being inconvenienced or getting their hands dirty. Our neighbors don't need Christians who talk a good game but hardly lift a finger to help.

Our neighbors need compassion. They need mercy. We give them these things when we lend a sympathetic ear or a helping hand. And we also share with them what they need the most. We give them Jesus—His healing, His promise, His grace through the message of the Gospel. Jesus tells us to go and do this. The Good Samaritan is a picture for us, not of how we can fulfill the Law and get ourselves to heaven by our works. The Good Samaritan is a picture of Jesus' love which He has shown to us, and which He gives us the opportunity and the privilege to show to others.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +