

# Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10), Year C

## The Text: Luke 10:25-37

An expert in the law rose up to test Jesus, saying: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" When Luke tells us that this man is an expert in the Law, he uses 'Law' in the sense of God's instruction of the Torah, the first five books of Israel's Scripture and of ours, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These books were central to Israel's Scriptures, faith, and piety. But the expertise this man has goes beyond God's Word and includes a comprehensive understanding of the 600+ regulations Jewish rabbis imposed as additional requirements which would supposedly ensure the observance of God's law in every detail. This guy really knows his stuff, so surely amongst his vault of knowledge there must be some way he can bring Jesus unstuck. If only the Jewish authorities could trick this troublemaker Jesus and bring a charge against him then they could be rid of this religious fruitcake and his meddlesome ways; he who interfered in their lives and wanted to do away with their traditions. So this expert in the law has a golden opportunity. He asks Jesus the question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's the question that is central to every faith worldview isn't it? It's the question that is central to our text today, and a question central to the plan of the Pharisees and Scribes and Teachers of the Law, of whom this expert was one, to trap Jesus in heresy and therefore have a reason to do away with him.

So he asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with a masterstroke, to answer the question with one of his own: "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

In his response to Jesus, this expert of the Law shows he is indeed that; he absolutely nails it: "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 neighbour as yourself." In the first part of his answer the expert in the Law quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and with his second part, Leviticus 19:18. This expert in the Law really did know God's Word. That is why Jesus told him: "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

I wonder though, do we really need to be an expert in the law to know this? Do we need a PhD in theology to know that we must love God with all our soul, strength and mind? Luther was a Doctor of Theology and explained the first commandment 'To have no other gods' to mean that "We are to fear, love and trust God above anything else.' Do we really need to be an expert in the Law or have a Doctorate to know this is truly what God asks of us? Do we really need to be an expert in the Law to also know that we should love others?

The two will go together; to love God with all of our heart and mind and soul means we will love our neighbour, if we are loving our neighbour it means we really

love God and his concern that all people be protected, respected, provided for and cared about. We do know that...*don't* we? Could it really be possible that we're here today, knowing that we are to worship God yet not knowing that God wants us to care for those who sit across the aisle, those in the community, those in the wider world? Surely we do *know* that, don't we? We don't need a course called *Refresh* to know those things.

The expert in the Law knew these things and Jesus affirms him accordingly: "You have answered correctly." But there is the pitfall. The expert has not trapped Jesus, only himself. These things *are* what God's Law says that one must do to inherit eternal life. So Jesus answers: "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live." The "do this" in the original Greek is 'keep on doing this.' Jesus is telling the Lawyer that he would have to show perfect love to God and his neighbour every single second of his life, without ever lapsing into the slightest failure. *Then* he would gain eternal life.

So there is the problem. No matter how well we know God's Law, no matter how often we study it, we are not able to carry it out. Jesus showed the expert in the Law that he was on the wrong track in his thinking about securing eternal life. If this expert in the Law—or anyone for that matter—wants to put the matter of being saved on the basis of doing or earning, well, this—and no less—is what they must do. There has only ever been only one way to salvation offered by God and that is righteousness through faith in God's promise. For Israel it was the promise that God would send them a Saviour, for us it is the promise that whoever believes in this Saviour God sent, Jesus the Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins, will receive eternal life. Only through trusting in God's promise apart from our efforts and strivings do we receive forgiveness, life, salvation, God's own righteousness and peace for our souls. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law and Christ would have died for nothing.

The expert in the Law realises he has trapped himself. He knew what he was supposed to do...but he didn't have the strength to actually *do* it. So he tries to weasel out of what God requires. When those who trust in their own goodness to earn God's favour doubt whether they are actually keeping God's law, they take care of that difficulty by watering down the demands of God's word to assure themselves. God demands that we love him with everything we've got, and that we love our neighbour as ourselves. So wanting to justify himself, he said to Jesus: "And who is my neighbour?"

Do you ask that question—"Who is my neighbour?" Is our neighbour those people we like? Those who are good to us? Those who are our friends? Those who are our literal neighbours, who live over the road, or on the farm next to ours? If that's what is meant by neighbour, then it becomes a bit easier for us to achieve, doesn't it?

So Jesus gives a parable to show how we ourselves are to be a neighbour to others—whoever that may be. A certain man was passing from Jerusalem to Jericho. This road is a 27km long winding descent through very rugged country; a lonely stretch notorious for bandits that attacked travellers. This man in Jesus' parable fell

victim to such bandits, who robbed him, stripped him, and beat him, leaving him bruised, bloodied, and half-dead. A callous act. A priest and a Levite pass him by.

Then a Samaritan comes and shows his compassion for the beaten man in a series of compassionate actions. He draws near to the man out of concern, applies first aid to him by pouring olive oil and wine on his wounds—a kind of antiseptic in the ancient world. He bandages the man's wounds, possibly by tearing strips from his own garments as it is unlikely he would have a bandage with him. The Samaritan puts the man on his own animal, presumably a donkey, and leads him to more permanent care—an inn. He pays the innkeeper two denarii from his own savings to give the man lodgings and care. Two denarii would have been the equivalent to about two months accommodation. Even if this is not enough, the Samaritan promises to repay any outstanding balance when he returns.

It would have pained this expert in the Torah to hear this—because the Jews despised the Samaritans. They held them in the highest contempt and regarded them as sinners. They were cursed publicly in the synagogue with the prayer that they might have no part in the resurrection of life, marriage with them was prohibited, and to eat their food was considered equal to eating swine's flesh. Yet it is a Samaritan who has shown God's mercy to the man left for dead.

Jesus tells this parable to teach the expert in the Law—and us—how we are to show love and compassion to all people. God wants worship and service that consists not merely of outward, mechanical words and acts, but that which is truly spiritual—*“With all your heart and with all your soul”*—called forth by the love of him who first loved us.

Jesus is teaching us that we cannot be a Christian and not be involved with sufferers on the Jericho Road. Yet like the Priest and the Levite we can pass by. We can justify inaction or simply close our eyes to need. Instead of compassionate hands and tongues we can speak and act harshly. We simply can't love our neighbour as ourselves 100% of the time and we know that all too well. So how is a person to show mercy as the Samaritan did? Such compassion can only be given after a person has first received compassion themselves. The law can change behaviour. It places restrictions on us. It chastises us and threatens punishment and consequences if it is breached. Threatened by the law we are usually pressured to do what we are obligated to in particular situations.

To show the love and compassion that the Samaritan did means that we need a new heart, so that out of our hearts we willingly love and serve. It is the gospel that works change in us. The gospel that says God so loved the world even though it is evil, broken, callous, selfish, self-destructive. The gospel that says God loves the world even though it is sinful and self-seeking, greedy and exploitative and inflicts the most traumatic instances of suffering on the innocent. The gospel that says that God loves the world that does not love him with all its heart, soul, strength, and mind, and doesn't love its neighbour as itself. The gospel is that God loves this world so much that he sent his Son into it to save it and to bring new life in us through the same mighty power that raised him from the dead.

The gospel is Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus shows us a glimmer of this reality in his parable, in the character of the beaten man lying on the road. The beaten man came into town on the back of the Samaritan's own donkey. Christ rode into town on the back of a donkey too, into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, entering into town triumphantly in the last stages of his journey to his death on the Cross. Like the beaten man in our text, Jesus was also beaten, bloodied and bruised, stripped of his clothes, and abandoned by the Jews. He was not just left half-dead, but killed as the Passover lamb, slain, for the forgiveness of all your sins. Jesus paid the penalty of unrighteousness with his innocent death on the Cross so that the unrighteous would be declared righteous through trusting in him, just like you. Have any of us fulfilled love for God and neighbour perfectly? No way! But our risen and crucified Lord says *I have...for you.*

In compassion he has freed us from the Law with all its condemnation. We are freed to "go and do likewise"—to be a neighbour to whoever we meet—and to serve them with the mercy and compassion of Christ, a mercy and compassion that we have first received from him. Amen.