

Sermon -- 07/14/19

Text — Luke 10:25-37

Theme — “The Law Says”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you ask a wrong or bad question, you will often get a wrong or bad answer — even if the answer given DOES satisfy the question. For instance, one of the questions I hear a lot when teaching confirmation class is: “Pastor, can I go to the bathroom?” That is the wrong question, isn’t it? Because it uses the word “can” when the person really means “may”. “Can” deals with ability; “may” with permission. So, when one of the kids asks me that question, I will usually respond by saying: “I don’t know — CAN you? But, yes, you MAY go to the bathroom.”

Or when Lisa asks me: “Do you want to help me with the dishes?” Another wrong, or bad, question. Do I WANT to help her with the dishes? Well, of course not! WILL I help her with the dishes? That’s another, and entirely different, question. Now, obviously, when Lisa asks such a question I do not respond with a quick “No!” — although I have to admit, I do sometimes correct her question. And, yes, I do sometimes help with the dishes. But not as often as I say I do.

Well, we have an example of a wrong or bad question in our Gospel lesson today. And because it is a bad question, the answer Jesus gives — though true — is not all that helpful. Which is why He then goes on to make things more clear with a parable. All that is what we will be talking about today in our sermon.

St. Luke begins this passage by telling us that a certain “lawyer” gets up to test Jesus with a question. That right there tells us two things: the questioner is a lawyer, and his motivation appears to be (at best) suspect.

The man is a lawyer. Now, that does not mean the same thing as we usually think of when we hear the word. This fellow was not a Perry Mason kind of lawyer, who defends or prosecutes criminal cases in court. Nor is he like the lawyer who helps draw up your last will and testament. No, when Luke tells us this man was a lawyer, he is talking about an expert in the Law of Moses. Law, in the sense of the Ten Commandments. The prescribed offerings. The causes and cures of ritual uncleanness. In short, this man was a theologian. A teacher of the Law. That tells us his starting place.

Then, we learn that he asks his question of Jesus as a test. Like so many of the Jewish theologians — whether they be scribe or Pharisee or Sadducee — this man thinks he knows all the answers. And he is going to quiz Jesus to see if He knows them too. There is more than a little bit of ego, of superiority, of self-importance in such an attitude. And so the man asks his question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

And there it is, the bad or wrong question. Did you notice it? Being good Lutherans, you probably did. He asks what HE must do to get himself into heaven. Now, we all know that such a thing is impossible. No one can do enough to earn heaven. We are sinners. We deserve God’s condemnation. All that we do is tainted and polluted by sin, even when we try our best. Even if we could stop sinning altogether right this moment, it still would never make up for our past sins. It is just as we confessed earlier today in this very service: we are poor, miserable sinners who violate the Law every day by our thoughts/words/deeds. We are conceived and born in sin. And can do nothing ourselves to fix it.

But our friend the lawyer does not get that. Our friend, the great and learned expert in the Law, misunderstands its very purpose and role. He thinks the Law has been given to us so that we can follow and do it ourselves, and thus deserve God’s approval. And so, he asks the wrong question.

But Jesus, knowing the question to be faulty, still answers it. The man thinks he can be saved by the Law, so Jesus points him right back to that Law. He asks: “What does the Law say?” To which

the lawyer responds with a nice and accurate summary of that Law: love God perfectly, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus then says “Do THAT and you will live.” Of course, Jesus knows the man does not — and cannot — do what the Law requires. So, even though Jesus answers the question as asked by the man, you see that He is really trying to get the expert to see that the Law cannot save, but rather it accuses and points out our sin (and our need for a Savior). In short, the Law’s chief purpose is to drive us to the Gospel, the Good News of Christ for us. But that poor man is still blind! He still thinks he knows what to do to save himself.

And yet, it seems as if there was maybe a little bit of doubt creeping into his self-righteous certainty. For his next question implies that he understands that he has NOT loved everyone as himself. So, he asks: “And who is my neighbor?” Where does Jesus draw the lines? It was not unusual or uncommon among the Jews to consider it acceptable to only treat fellow Jews as a neighbor. Gentiles were not of God’s chosen people, and so were not entitled to the same treatment as another Jew. God loved the Jews, but not so much the Gentiles. Surely Jesus could not mean otherwise.

And, to answer that question (“Who is my neighbor?”), Jesus tells the great parable of the Good Samaritan. You all know it well. So well that I need not go into great detail in recalling it here. In broad strokes, the story is of a man (a Jew, we may safely assume) who is beaten and robbed and left to die by the side of the road. Of how two other good Jews — a priest and Levite, men of God — see the man and his circumstance, and ignore him, leaving him to his horrible fate. But a third man — a Samaritan, the most hated of all peoples to the Jews — comes along, and HE acts. He saves the man. Because he has compassion and love for him. He fulfills the Law, loving even an enemy as himself.

Now, the interesting thing about this parable is how Jesus arranges it. He could have made the Samaritan the victim of the robbery and had three Jews come along, with one of them saving the Samaritan, showing love. But that is not how Jesus set up the story, is it? No, it is the Samaritan — the despised and rejected outsider — who is the hero. The savior. The keeper of the Law. Why? After all, if the point of the parable was to simply illustrate what WE must do (that is, how we can save ourselves by the Law), then the story would still work (in fact, it would even work better!) if the third man were a Jew showing love to a Samaritan. But that is not how Jesus told it.

No, the only one who kept the Law’s requirement was one that was hated and rejected. One who was looked down upon with suspicion, even contempt. One who was viewed much as was Jesus by the Jewish theologians, like this very man, this expert in the Law. Jesus is talking about Himself! He is the Good Samaritan. The One who the “good” people — like the priest and the Levite, like the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees — rejected. Jesus — and Jesus alone — is the Hero, the Savior, the Keeper of the Law. Not us.

Let’s face it — have we ALWAYS done what the Law demands? Oh, sure, sometimes we are good and kind and forgiving. Sometimes we show love, even to an enemy. But not all the time. Not perfectly. Not without hesitation. It is not just the villains of the Bible, like those scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees, who fail. It is us too. We can’t help it. Not since Adam’s sin. It is part of our fallen human nature. We are selfish and self-centered and sinful. Greedy and corrupt and envious. Malicious and vengeful. Whisperers and gossips. Lustful and boastful and violent. And don’t get me started on how we fail to love God about all things, with all our heart/soul/strength/mind! If all we have is the Law, and we are told to do it and live, then we are without any hope. Then we are like that man in the ditch: robbed of our illusions of goodness, and left to die eternally because of our sin. And the Law — as personified by the priest and Levite — cannot and does not help us. For the Law, though good and from God, is inflexible and demanding. It does not give, it has not grace and mercy and forgiveness. It accuses and judges and leaves us to die — as is right and fair. For we ARE sinners.

But then along comes the Good Samaritan, Jesus. Even though fallen and sinful man would not receive Him, He still loves. Perfectly. Sacrificially. Even though, in our sin, we would reject Him, He does not reject us. No, He sees us dying in our sin — and He acts. He saves. Jesus picks us up. He

takes our load of sin. He carries it to the cross and pays the full price. He suffers and dies and takes our hell. Not because we deserve it, but only because He loves even us. Even us.

You are a sinner. You know it. Even hardened unbelievers, in their heart of hearts, know it. Oh, they may protest and deny and argue. But deep down, they know. And they know what they deserve. That is why fallen man shakes his fist at God and blames Him, just as did Adam in Eden after the Fall, saying: “The woman You gave me...” We sin and then blame God and say: “You made me this way... You did not give me what I wanted... You put me in this evil world.”

And, amazingly, God does not cast us aside. Just as He promised Adam and Eve, so He has done. He has provided a Savior, One who would crush the head of the Serpent, But only at a cost. A great and infinite cost. The cost of God taking our place in life and in death. The cost of the cross. The cost of our hell. He is the Good Samaritan who has pity/mercy/compassion. Who shows love, even when it is not deserved or reciprocated. Who lifts up the spiritually dead and makes them alive again.

He has done that for you. In baptism, you were re-born/re-created/resurrected. Into the water went a sinner and out came a saint. He called you by name (as He did last week with little Piper). He made you His own. Forever. And when you fall into sin again (as we all do), He comes again and calls you back. His Law reminds you of your sin and need for a Savior. His Gospel revives you and gives you faith. In the absolution, He forgives you — again and again and again. And with Christ’s own Body and Blood, you are fed and nourished and made alive again.

So, now you are forgiven. You are saved. You are alive again. Because you have been made one with Christ. What is yours — sin — has become His. And what is His — perfection, holiness, righteousness — have been made yours. He has kept the Law, perfectly, for you in His life and death.

But notice what Jesus says at the end of His parable: “Go and do likewise”. So, does that mean that He is now leaving us alone, to try and do what the Law says/demands? Of course not. Because we still cannot. Not even as Christians. No, our Good Samaritan does not put us back under the Law again. We are, and must remain, under the Gospel or we will die. So, what does He mean when He says “Go and do likewise”?

Well, as Christians we have been changed. Our hearts and minds have been changed. We no longer see the Law as our means to earn heaven, but rather as our way of showing gratitude for the gift of heaven. As the way to reflect and share our Father’s love. We are Christians — little Christs. We see that God does and acts and gives and loves — through us! He uses us as His hands and feet, His lips and voice, to love our neighbor. And our neighbor is anyone and everyone. Just as Christ Jesus died for all, so He would have us speak and share and do for all. And when we fail (and we will), we come to Him for forgiveness and for help to do better tomorrow. And He will, because He is our Good Samaritan.

Wrong questions lead to wrong answers. The world around us is asking the wrong questions, because it knows not the Gospel but only the Law. But you know the Gospel. You have been made alive by the Gospel. And now, we rejoice to share it with others, by our words and actions, so that others may know their Savior, the Good Samaritan, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.