

Many times through Jesus' ministry we have an event that begins like our one today. An expert in the law asks a question. He wanted to test Jesus, see who he really was. But it seems to come out that this expert in the law was less interested in Jesus giving an answer he could be arrested for (like many of the other "tests" he was subjected to) but rather that this man wanted an answer from Jesus that affirmed his current way of life. More than anything, it was selfish. Still the wrong reasons of course, but it doesn't appear to be an outright attack on Jesus.

So the expert stands up and asks the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, it becomes obvious through what we read here that the expert wasn't really interested in finding out an answer, like say, the jailer at Philippi was when he asked. No, the expert just asked so that he could be told he was already doing all the right things and so he could be told in front of the crowd that he was certainly going to get eternal life. Of course, he was pretty sure, as he understood God's law, that this was the answer he was going to get, or he wouldn't have asked it.

So this expert in the law asks a good question for the wrong reasons. And that is why we get Jesus giving us the answer he does. Remember what Paul and Barnabas told the jailer at Philippi? He got a straight answer, "Believe and be baptized." Jesus doesn't do that here. We have to remember God's chief operating principle when dealing with human beings, something he's done all the way back since the time he made a helper for Adam. God does not fill our need without first making us aware of the need itself. This expert in the law did not understand his need for Jesus as a savior, he did not understand his need for the forgiveness of sins. And so Jesus seeks first to create that understanding in the man.

"You asked what you must do to inherit eternal life." Jesus says, "Well, you're the expert in the law, what does it say?"

"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 replies.

"This is what you must do."

Now, any one of us hear a tall order like that and immediately realize the futility of thinking we could live up to it. That just can't be done, there's too much to it. But this expert in the law still does not grasp that. He perhaps has an idea but he wants to nail it down. So he asks his follow-up question, designed again to have Jesus tell him that he's been doing it right all along, "And who is my neighbor?"

And in reply, we get one of the more famous Bible stories in history. A man is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and is set upon by robbers. He is stripped, beaten and left for dead. A religious leader of the day passes on the road, but ignores him and passes by on the other side. A temple helper comes along and he too passes by on the other side of the road. But then a Samaritan, one of those filthy half-breeds who don't belong to the nation of God's promise, he comes along and has compassion on the man. He takes the time to care for him, pays two days wages worth of silver and leaves an open tab at the local inn for the man's care (a bill that would quite likely be artificially inflated by the innkeeper).

And then Jesus asks the question, "Which was the neighbor to the man in need?"

The expert replies, "The one who had mercy on him."

"Go and do likewise."

Did you notice what Jesus did there? The expert asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" There was the understanding at the time that when God gave directives involving neighbors, he only meant those who belonged to religious Israel. That meant anyone who was a Jew and anyone who had converted to their religion. But not anybody else. Outside of Israel wasn't neighbors, and you could cheat and swindle and lie and whatever else you wanted to them, because they weren't part of the command. Now, with that in mind, you would *think* Jesus might tell a story about how a Jewish priest stopped to help a Samaritan or Greek or Roman in need. But he didn't at all. In fact, in the entire story, who is the one man *not* identified?

The one who needed help.

The question was "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus deliberately avoided identifying the object of mercy in his story. And then we see how Jesus wraps up his discussion with the opposite question. Not, "Who is my neighbor?" but instead, "Who *acted* like a neighbor?" The question the expert asked was wrong. And so Jesus asks him the proper question. The expert gets the right answer, and Jesus tells him to go and do likewise. The question is not, "Who do I have to do this to?" The question is, "How can I be a neighbor to others?" The identity of the others is immaterial; the question we ask is not looking out but looking in. How can I best love those around me as myself? How can I best show

compassion to those around me like the Samaritan here? Who gave without considering the cost, without caring about his own needs in being slowed down that day, without caring about the actual identity of the man he was helping.

And so that is the lesson Jesus is trying to teach us here, right? That is the point. That we must be likewise compassionate to all. We must be ready to reach out to any in need with whatever help we are able to provide at all times. Not begrudging the time or money or effort it takes us, but giving freely of what we have to help others because that is what God asks of us. Jesus is trying to teach us just how far we have to take compassion for it to be proper and genuine.

Wrong.

Now, I'm not saying the story doesn't teach that. It is a good example to us of the kind of love that God asks us to demonstrate, the kind of love that God's law requires. But that is *not* the point Jesus is trying to make here. It is *not* what he is trying to teach us through this parable. To understand that, we have to go back to the beginning of this encounter. How did it begin? The expert in the law asked a question for the wrong reasons. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And then Luke tells us that "he wanted to justify himself." The expert wasn't interested in the answer, he simply wanted to be told he was already awesome enough to have eternal life. The point of the parable was to teach this man that he was not.

We don't know how the expert responded to Jesus' lesson. Perhaps he understood right away what Jesus was trying to tell him. Perhaps he did not, and instead took Jesus at his word when he said, "Go and do likewise." Perhaps you've done the same. Perhaps you've come across this account from time to time, read about the great compassion and love the Samaritan showed, and vowed that you would do what Jesus said here, you would show that kind of love and compassion to all in your life.

It's tough going to be that selfless. There's a constant voice eating away at you inside telling you to stop doing that. To look out for yourself. To not be so nice to people who've been mean to you. To not help that person because it might be dangerous. To hold back your help because there might not be enough for you. The constant rationalizations and justifications for not doing what we know to be the right thing. And the voice wins out. Not every time. But enough. Maybe at that point you sort of forget that you're going to try so hard anyway. Maybe you redouble your efforts and try again only to fail again. Maybe, just maybe you realize the point Jesus was trying to make.

The point was never to give you a manual on how to earn eternal life. It wasn't even to teach you how to be a nice person. The point was to show this expert in the law, and even us that we have not lived up to the standards set before us because we are sinful and selfish where God demands holiness and selflessness. The parable of the good Samaritan is not a nice story about how we should all be nice to each other. It was condemning law for the man who asked and for us as well. It teaches us plainly that we have not and cannot meet God's standards.

We hope that the expert in our account came to understand this and returned to God for more answers. You and I have been helped along this road. The law has beaten us all down, teaching us that we have not been the neighbor God demands. But we know our Lord Jesus. He was the perfect neighbor. He was the good Samaritan. The one who saw us broken and bleeding to death. He was the one who didn't care who we were or where we came from, but had compassion on us. He healed our wounds, and he paid out for our care without caring about what it cost him. He paid it in blood and it cost him his life. But he did it willingly. And his perfect life, his perfect actions have been attributed to each of us. In the eyes of our heavenly Father we have done what the law requires because Jesus did.

We have a new life in our Lord. We are, in him, *capable* of being the good neighbor he asks us to be. And in response to his gracious love, we do strive to live that way. But not to inherit eternal life. Not because it is a demand of God. We live that way because that is who we are in Christ. The demands of the law have taught us our sinfulness, but in Christ the law is satisfied. We don't live it because it is required, we live it because that is freedom. Through Christ, we inherit eternal life, because he treated us in love as his neighbor. Amen.