

July 15, 2007

A Jewish lawyer, someone who reads and interprets the laws in the bible sets out to test Jesus. He asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Right away the Lutheran stood up and yelled “Works righteousness”.

Ok there weren’t any Lutherans yet. But you’re all Lutherans and I heard you yell. Ok you didn’t yell but you were thinking it weren’t you? What must I do.

Jesus answers: what is written in the law? How do you read it? He replies, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and all your mind. And you should love your neighbor as your self.*

Jesus says do this and you shall live.

The Lutheran said, What?

Ok that’s right there was no Lutheran there. We say: what? Again that sounds like works righteousness. It sounds like earning your way into heaven. But the story isn’t over.

But wanting to justify himself,

See this lawyer has the same idea. He wants to justify himself. He wants to be able to do something to make himself just and right, make himself good in god’s eyes, eligible for eternal life.

Like all good lawyers, he is looking for a loophole. How does he limit the scope of his responsibility here? He has a problem. The first statement doesn’t have any wiggle room. Where is the wiggle room or loop hole in Loving God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength? There is no wiggle room because there is no limit to the command. You are never done. As long as you live there is more to your all.

I remember when I was in grade school, my father would say. “I don’t care what grades you get, I just want you to do the best you can.” First of all I’m not convinced he didn’t care what grade I received. The point was I was to do the best I could. Doing the best you can is much harder than attaining a certain grade. In a way it is easier or at least attainable to receive high grades. I’m not saying it’s easy but once you have achieved the grade you’re done. When the goal is to do the best you can it is never over.

Additionally, like most parents, my parents over estimated my abilities. They thought I could do a lot more than I could.

So the Lawyer has no wiggle room, no loophole in the first part loving God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. But the second part, Love your neighbor as your self, there might be some promise there.

You could say, *I really don’t like my self that much, so I don’t have to treat my neighbor so well.* But that’s not going to work.

The lawyer’s plan is to establish the extent of his responsibility. Who do I have to love as I love myself and who am I not responsible for. It’s not possible to love the whole world

as your self so who is it that I don't have to care about. Who is it that I can forget about? So he asks Jesus the question, who is my neighbor?

Jesus tells him that familiar parable of the good Samaritan. For those of you who don't know the story, it is important to know, that the Jewish people did not get along with the Samaritans.

As the story goes, a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves the beat, him stripped him and left him half dead.

A priest comes and passes by on the other side. A Levite did the same.

But a Samaritan was moved with pity and helps him and brings him to a place where he could get help and paid for everything.

When we hear this story we often get sucked in to identifying our selves with either the Samaritan. "Yeah I am kind hearted and I would have helped the man." Or as Lutherans with a good understanding of guilt we might see that we might not have helped that man. We might see the Samaritan as a role. And in fact the CCIC the church organization of Cannon Falls has used the Samaritan for the name of our account for helping people in need, The Good Samaritan Fund.

But I assure you Jesus' audience never would have looked at a Samaritan as a role model no matter what he did.

Jesus asks who was the neighbor to the man. And the Lawyer replies, the one who showed mercy.

As we look at what Jesus expects of us. We see that we are to Love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all of our mind. We also understand we are to love our neighbor as our selves. We too might ask, who is my neighbor? Just as the Lawyer understood we understand that we can't love every body. So in an attempt to discern who our neighbor is, let's do this. Instead of seeing ourselves as either the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan it would be more helpful to see our selves as the man in the ditch.

Picture in your mind, you are traveling and fall into the hands of thieves who beat you, strip you and leave you half dead. You are lying in the ditch, injured, naked and desperate. You cannot help yourself.

The lawyer answers Jesus correctly the neighbor to the man was the one who showed mercy.

As you are lying in that ditch, half dead, who do you, want to be your neighbor?

Who do you want to be your neighbor? Who do you want to show you mercy? You don't know how long you can hold out. You may die. Who do you want to be your neighbor? Wouldn't you want anybody to help you?

Like the Lawyer we know that we can't show mercy and help everyone. So we take the command and we try to limit its scope in order to make it manageable.

But Jesus is not interested in making things manageable. Jesus is interested in people who are in need.

This law's purpose is not to make things manageable. The purpose is to help people in need and to show us our sin. When we see our sin, when we see our limitations, we are able to see our need for God's grace. Which thankfully is in abundance.

Jesus is the Samaritan who sees us in our need. Lying in the ditch stripped beaten and half dead there would be no way to see what kind of person we are, how rich or poor we are. No way to see our social status. We would only be able to accept his grace.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength and all your mind. And love your neighbor as your self.*