

The Key to the Scriptures

In the name of him in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, dear friends in Christ: One of the great distinctions of our Lutheran theology is recognizing the need to properly distinguish Law and Gospel when seeking to understand a passage of Scripture. It's the key that opens the Bible for interpretation. As we examine a text we have to ask, is this Law, that is, something God is telling me to do? Or is it Gospel, that is, something the Lord does or promises to do for me? Someone who can consistently get that distinction right, Luther said, should be called a doctor of theology. And getting it wrong has led to some of the worst errors and most dangerous false doctrine imaginable. If you're having heart surgery, you want a real doctor working on you. And if it's your soul that's being worked on, you want a real theologian.

With this in mind, we turn our attention to today's reading from St. Luke: the dearly loved parable of the Good Samaritan. Pretty much everyone knows this story, even people who aren't particularly religious or biblically literate. It has all the features of a good short story: a sudden tragedy, despicable villains in the persons of the uncaring priest and Levite, an unlikely hero to the rescue, and a satisfying conclusion. No wonder people love this story.

But they shouldn't; not on the surface anyway. Because we have to ask that all important theological question: is this Law or Gospel? The answer isn't hard to find. It's right there in the first sentence. A lawyer comes up to Jesus and asks, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus tells the parable as part of the answer to that question. It's his elaboration of what the Lord means when he said "love your neighbor as yourself." Clearly the story is Law: what God demands of us. More than that, it's strong Law that condemns every one of us.

Consider: the lawyer who questioned Jesus thought he had mastered the command to love God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. No problems that he could see in himself there. (He was wrong.) And, like people who think legalistically do, he thought if he could whittle down the definition of neighbor to include only a small number of people, say his immediate family and closest friends, well, then he had the command to love the neighbor fully under control also.

But Jesus wouldn't let him do that. No, Jesus picks a Samaritan to be the injured man's neighbor in his illustration. Jews despised Samaritans. To them Samaritans were worse than pond scum. In return Samaritans resented the Jews for the way they thought of themselves as so much more superior and holy. In other words, Jesus chooses the last guy on the planet the lawyer might think of to be the neighbor of the injured man. The point being no one is excluded. Your neighbor is every human alive.

Even more, Jesus illustrates by his story what the Lord means when he commands us to *love* your neighbor. Again, thinking legalistically, we want to chop that word down to mean something like be friendly and try to get along with. But that's not what it means. As you've heard me say before, the biblical definition of love is voluntary self-sacrificial devotion. It's choosing to place other people's needs above your own, their safety and wellbeing above your own, and to do your best for them regardless of what it costs you – and all of this willingly, gladly, without reservation because what concerns you most is them, not yourself.

Go back to the story. A Jewish man, presumably traveling alone, is descending the steep path that goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. It winds through narrow ravines that provide excellent opportunities for thieves to hide and ambush their victims. Sure enough, that's what happens to this poor guy. Thieves rob, beat, and strip him of his clothes. They leave him bleeding and unconscious beside the trail.

Along comes a priest and then later a Levite. These men are both steeped in Scripture. They know better than anyone what the Law of God requires. Yet both fail to act on behalf of their fellow countryman. Jesus doesn't tell us why. There are several possibilities. It could be that they wish to avoid ceremonial defilement. The priest and Levite both perform official duties for the Lord on behalf of God's people. According to the Law of Moses, coming into contact with a corpse makes a person unclean for a certain period of time after which a ritual of sacrifice and cleansing is required to render them fit for duty again. They may be concerned that the man is already dead or may die while they are rendering aid, which would leave them temporarily unfit for duty. They may be weighing what they consider to be the greater good: my service for the Lord and his people or my service for this hapless stranger. And they judge their service for God to be more important. That could be it.

Another distinct possibility is that they don't want to get involved. They have their own problems to deal with, their own plans to complete, their own timetables to keep. Assisting this wounded man would be messy, upset their schedules, and complicate their lives. Better to ignore his problem, pretend not to see it, and move on.

Yet another possibility is that they fear it's a ruse. Thieves sometimes bait an ambush with a pretend victim – or it could be a real victim. Either way, when you stop to render assistance, that's when the thieves strike and get you too. But if this is their concern, the priest and Levite have a distinct advantage over the Samaritan who comes along later. There is some small amount of honor among thieves. Operating in Judea these thieves are almost certainly Jews. And while they don't mind breaking the seventh commandment for a living, it's likely they think it would be taboo to rob a holy man. That, they fear, would make God really angry.

It could be for any or all of these reasons that the priest and Levite fail to come to the aid of the robbed and injured guy – or at least that's how they might have justified their behavior. But the biggest reason they fail to act is that they lack something the Good Samaritan has. They lack compassion – a word that literally means "to suffer with". Compassion is a significant aspect of love. It's what makes your problems, your suffering, mine too.

That it's a Samaritan who has compassion on this victim makes his actions that much more noble. He knows that if the situation were reversed, if he were the victim and the wounded Jewish man were the healthy one, that guy would pass him by with no more concern than you have when driving by a road-kill skunk. He'd be thinking the only good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan. Our hero here knows that. It makes no difference to him. What he sees, what he feels in his gut, is a fellow human in need. Thus he responds in love.

He takes a huge risk in the process. The text says that after treating the man's wounds the Samaritan places him on his *own* donkey, implying that he has more than one. It suggests that he is a trader of some kind transporting his merchandise to Jericho to sell there. It also explains why a Samaritan would be traveling in Judea. But think: that a guy has been beaten and robbed means that there are thieves operating in the area. And who do you think would make a more lucrative target for Jewish thieves, a Jewish guy traveling alone or a Samaritan leading donkeys loaded with trade goods? And again, this whole thing could be a set up to lure

him into an ambush. If nothing else, stopping to help extends the amount of time he spends in this dangerous area, thus increasing his exposure. No matter. The Good Samaritan throws caution to the wind. Helping a man in need is more important to him than his personal safety.

He cleanses the man's wounds, adding oil and wine to ward off infection. He binds his injuries with bandages. Then he loads him up on the donkey, and leading it afoot, takes the wounded man to Jericho where he pays in advance to have him lodged and taken care of for as long as it takes for him to recover, promising to return and cover whatever other expenses might be incurred. All of this without even knowing the guy's name.

To the lawyer who asked, Jesus says this is the standard. This is what God demands of you when he says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Do *this* and you will live – not just once, but every moment of every day. Fail to do it even once and you've not kept the commandment. You will surely die. Go directly to hell, do not pass go, do not collect \$200.

Where does that leave you? As I said before, people like this story, but it's hard to see why. It is crushing Law that condemns us all to hell. It's like a verbal artillery barrage from the Lord that blasts away our favorable impression of ourselves and robs of any hope. It proves what St. Paul says of salvation: by the works of the Law no one will be saved.

But then that's the purpose of the Law: not to give us hope, but to lead us to despair of ourselves and our abilities with respect to earning salvation. The purpose of the Law is to show us that if we want to be saved, we need to find another way.

As it turns out, that other way is also revealed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's even hinted at in the lawyer's original question. He asked Jesus, "What shall I do to *inherit* eternal life? The question is self-contradicting. To inherit something, you don't *do* anything. No, if you inherit something it means that someone else has named you an heir and then dies. An inheritance is a free gift from a dead donor.

Look, if the Law has done its work, then we will realize that with respect to earning salvation, we are as robbed, beaten, senseless, and helpless as the man who fell among the thieves. We have as much chance of working ourselves to glory as he has of walking himself to Jericho. Like him, we need someone to rescue us – someone who has compassion for us.

And we have that: a man despised and rejected by men; a man who made our problems his own; a man who for us risked all—his own life; a man who by whose stripes we are healed; a man who paid our debts and provides us a place to stay – promising to pay whatever future costs may be incurred; a man who is for us a true neighbor and the Good Samaritan; a man who named us his heirs of salvation and died on the cross for our sins.

So, the parable of the Good Samaritan: is it Law or Gospel? Well, yes. It's both. This is the genius of Jesus' teaching, and it demonstrates why it's so vitally important to properly distinguish between the two. May the Lord by his Holy Spirit grant us the wisdom and ability use this key rightly, and thus make us all true doctors of theology. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!