

All You Need is Love

A sermon by John Strommen on Luke 10:25-37 Oct. 8, 2017

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And so begins a conversation about ultimate destiny and its cost. Like a good counselor or teacher, Jesus puts the question to the lawyer asking a question in return: *Well, you know God's law, how do you read it? How would you answer your own question?*

The lawyer responds, *You shall 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.*

So, the Beatles were right! All you need is love! Love God, love your neighbor. **(pic #1)** But "your neighbor" is pretty specific. That sounds kind of real. We'd rather that love and neighbor are abstractions. Easier to love humankind than actual people.

But since loving your neighbor seems to suggest that actual people should actually be loved, this lawyer needed to know the fine print. It says the lawyer wanted to justify himself, and when you're trying to justify yourself, you want to know how the point system works, the conditions and terms. Naturally, the next question was this: *"Then who is my neighbor?"* If you can limit the scope of this, it will be easier to accomplish. This way of thinking leads to all sorts of questions: *How many people do I need to love? What kind of people do I need to love? Do I have to love Packer fans? What actually counts as an act of love? I need to know the minimum standard, so that I don't do more than I need to do. You see, I need to remember always what my primary goal is: to obtain eternal life, to justify myself before God.*

Does this sound like love?... It does sound like classes we've all taken. *"OK, I'm going to do the bare minimum to pass this class."* Doesn't work so well if you're going to be a loving person, though.

Tell me, what motivates love? Is it self-interest or self-advancement? Is it fear of retribution or relief from guilt? Is it a desire to be in control? *Can love ever be love* if the primary goal is some sort of calculus constructed for your own personal gain? Can love ever be love if it is not *first and foremost* initiated for the well-being of the one who is loved?

Think of people in your life who have loved you, who you knew cared about your well-being and were not in it for themselves. Can you think of at least one person?

It's doubtful the lawyer in this story can ever love, if love for him is done to accumulate merits for eternal life and justify himself. Unless you count love of self.

(pic #2) Martin Luther was fond of pointing out the drawbacks to the system of good works and accumulation of merit in Roman Catholicism. Now, contrary to what some believe, Roman Catholics did believe in the gift of grace, but when someone was given grace by God, they had to use that gift as sort of a power or fuel to ascend the ladder of righteousness to become acceptable one day to God. You ascended the ladder by loving others and doing good things...or if someone *didn't do enough* good things, they wouldn't get any more fuel, they would fall out of favor with God (and literally off the ladder) and their chances at salvation would diminish. So, faithful Catholics were very motivated to give

alms to the poor. That way, they could accumulate merit to receive more grace, and they would move up the ladder of righteousness.

For whose benefit would a good 16th century Catholic do good works and acts of charity? For his/her own benefit! So, having a lot of homeless people around was a benefit, because it gave good Catholics opportunities for points.

Now, there were people around who actually did love those who were homeless, and some of those people actively worked for justice. They said, *What if, in the city of Rome, we worked to eliminate hunger, making sure that everyone had enough to eat and a place to stay?*

Well, what do you suppose was the response of the Pope and his Cardinals to such a proposal? Believe it or not, they were opposed to eliminating homelessness and hunger. Do you know why? Because if everyone had food and shelter, you would take away opportunities for charitable deeds. Catholic men and women needed the homeless, so they could rack up points!

So, I ask you, is this about love? It is not. It is about self-advancement, not the well-being of the homeless. A person in need then is just a means to an end, not someone to be loved. Sometimes that person in need is living in your home, or at work.

The truth is, the people in Luther's world were not free. They were imprisoned - the homeless by their hunger and exposure, the Christians by their ladder climbing and fear of condemnation. And long before the folks of Luther's time, the lawyer who questioned Jesus, too, was using a calculator to figure out love.

(pic #3) The priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan knew the commandments to love your neighbor as yourself. But they walked by the man on the side of the road and it doesn't say why.

Why do you think they walked on by? Time. Purity laws. A foreigner. Repulsed.

For whatever reason, the injured man on the side of the road did not fit into the priest or the Levite's agenda for that day. They seemed to be concerned not with the needs of that man, but other questions maybe, like, "Will I be late?" "Will I get blood on my tunic?" "Is this *my* neighbor or *someone else's* neighbor?" Maybe they would have behaved differently if they knew people were watching and they had something to gain.

Who then will be an advocate for the man whose life is hanging by a thread?

It says the Samaritan was moved with pity. He was traveling and he saw this man lying on the side of the road. Sometimes the word pity gets a bad rap, as in "don't have pity on me." But pity is a good word here. It means essentially compassion or love. The Samaritan was moved by love and apparently had only one concern: the well-being of this man. And so we call him the "Good" Samaritan.

Martin Luther King once said this about the parable of the Good Samaritan: *The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But...the Good*

Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?' This is what love does, it is concerned for the well-being of the neighbor. So often, our love is compromised by our own agendas.

What keeps us from loving our neighbors – or our own family - like the Good Samaritan did?

Luther would say that we are not free. We are caught up in our own selves, like the priest and Levite, the lawyer who questioned Jesus, or the Roman Catholics of Luther's time. And if we're not free, we cannot love. Instead, we can only try to justify ourselves, or heal ourselves, or medicate ourselves. But that being the case, we cannot love in the way depicted by the Good Samaritan because our concern is with self, not neighbor. Others are then a means to an end.

The Samaritan was moved by compassion and he acted. There was no calculation, only compassion followed by action. Almost as if his muse was a power beyond him that was tapped by the circumstances before him. What was tapped was in fact love, it was spontaneous, and Luther would say, that is the way we were made.

I hear accounts about what happened on the ground with the recent shooting in Las Vegas. I hear about certain individuals who stayed in the line of fire to help out those who were injured, leaving themselves wide open as targets. So you have individuals not caught up in concern for themselves, but willing to lay down their lives for a brother or sister? Greater love has no man or woman.

Luther would say such love comes only from above, it is transcendent, and flows through us when we are free (**pic #4**). Free from what? From all our attempts to justify ourselves make ourselves whole. And yet everyone's quest is to be justified in this life, in this world, before God. Everyone's quest is to be whole. Yes, and it is Luther's passionate rebuttal to all that went before him that *only God can make us whole*, only God can justify us.

And it is God's promise that *we are justified*. It is God's promise to *make us whole*. These are gifts that free us from ourselves and our existential burdens. We don't have to create meaning for ourselves, make a name for ourselves, establish our worthiness, because those things are given. They are promised. So we don't have to treat people as pawns in our self-realization project. We are free. Free to love our neighbor, and that is exactly the way God made us: to love spontaneously.

We are free when we trust that God gives us all we need to live and be whole, when we trust that God gives us our worth and we don't have to create it. That's what faith is: trusting in the promises of God. Luther once wrote that faith *"brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly."*

In faith and baptism, God's love flows through us and to others. The Holy Spirit is loose in your life. Believe it! Amen.

