

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

10 September, Anno Domini 2017

St. Luke 10:23-37

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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” These are two crucial questions that Jesus asks and we need to regularly think about. The way in which we answer has a profound impact upon our eternal salvation and the peace of our conscience. We may have an academic understanding but when our own salvation is in question, when we are plagued by our guilt and shame, how do we answer then?

How many of us can make it past the first question? What is in the Law? Do you know the Law of God? Do you know what God demands of you? Do you meditate on the 10 commandments in a fervent desire to know the will of God? The lawyer most certainly did. That was his job. He was an expert in the Mosaic law. Lawyers of this kind arose six centuries before Christ in the midst of a renewed interest in the law, particularly after the times of Israel's exile. This man had devoted his life to knowing the law inside and out. Now maybe you never spend the time this lawyer did steeped in the law, but certainly, as God's people, we should long to know God's Word. Our ears should drink in everything God speaks like a sponge because it is the sole source of truth and even life itself. We should make it our business to know the commandments and the whole counsel of God. If we truly to believe it to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, then we should never tire of hearing it and praying for God's help in keeping it. If we desire to be faithful children of our heavenly Father then plant His holy commandments deep in your heart by daily hearing them, by learning them and committing them to your memory, and by fervently studying them so that you might rightly understand them. Can we really call ourselves children of God if we don't and won't bother to learn even the most basic of Christian teachings?

But it isn't simply enough to know the Law, to be able to recite it. That's why Jesus' asks the second question. "How do you read it?" In other words, "How do you understand it?" It is this question that separates the true Christian religion from all others. There is a knowledge of the Law that edifies and there is a knowledge of the Law that condemns.

The lawyer understood the Law the way our flesh is conditioned to think of the law - as a set of moral codes God gave so that we could know what good things we have to do in order to save ourselves. And he got them right. He summed them up as God Himself summed them up in Deuteronomy six - love the Lord your God and love your neighbor. That doesn't sound so hard. It's pretty simply, actually. Don't love ANYTHING, EVER, more than God. Trust Him in every situation to care for you and give you every good gift. Never doubt His promises even when He Himself speaks a word that seems completely contrary. Hold Him as your highest and only good. Be pleased to lose everything and suffer with Job and still say without an ounce of doubt "I know that my Redeemer lives and I will look upon Him." Never complain. Never worry. Love and care for you neighbor as you would have your neighbor love and care for you. Never let your anger rule you. Never leave your neighbor in need. Never place your desires and your good over your neighbor's. "Do this, and you will live."

But you already know, before I finish the sentence, what the problem is and exactly where the lawyer found himself. Trapped. He had set out to put Jesus to the test, to trap Him, but he is the one who is undergoing the most hellish test of his life. He was guilty and there was nowhere to run or hide. The flimsy fig leaves of self-righteousness had been ripped away from him and Jesus had left him standing there naked, humiliated, terrified. He had done none of those things. In truth, there was only one person he had ever actually loved, himself. He was an intensely learned scholar. He had spent years combing through the law, examining it like a fetal pig in high school biology, dissecting it and identifying all its parts. But the lawyer knew nothing about the law until that moment. Then he understood and he hated the law. It wasn't the source of life. It was death. It was God's voice of

righteous judgment. He had unwittingly condemned himself to hell. The Law had come by, robbed him of his vanity, clubbed him over the head with his guilt, and left him lying there on the road side nearly dead.

That is what the Law does. It isn't your friend. Because of your sinful flesh, because your natural will is set so fiercely against God and His will, the Law can do only one thing - kill you. It can only cast you into the fiery depths of despair because you haven't kept it - any of it. If you have failed in even the slightest part, you have failed in all of it. All of those so-called little sins, sins that you are comfortable with, sins that you try to quickly dismiss or excuse or overlook - all of them condemn you and reveal your hatred of God's Word. At this point the lawyer should have repented, he should have acknowledged his guilt and he would have seen standing before him the mercy of God in the flesh, a Savior filled with compassion and forgiveness. He would have heard a very different voice than that deep thundering of the Law. He would have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking words of peace and comfort to his battered and bleeding conscience.

Instead, the Old Adam fights on, unwilling to admit defeat. The sinful flesh digs in its heels and refuses to give ground, refuses to look to mercy, refuses the Law's judgment, refuses to admit its inability to do anything pleasing to God. Instead, it seeks some way to justify itself, some way to find some limit or loophole in the law so that it can find something to take credit for. That's the essence of the lawyer's follow question. Desperate to save face and in the absence of God's mercy, the lawyer hopes to narrow the field of obligation. He asks "Who then is my neighbor?" In other words "Who do I NOT have to love?" We ask "What if they might waste my love?" We say "They'll probably just use my help to sin more." We judge others as being unworthy of our love.

Repent. The Law can't help you. The Law can't be pacified or modified. *Lex semper accusat* - the Law always accuses. It will not help you out of the ditch. If you read and understand the Law as the means by which you will get yourself out of hell, you have read it completely wrong - you have

read it like a good lawyer. The Law torments us because it is relentless. It is absolute and it is never wrong. When we confront God's Law on God's terms we always end up bloodied on the side of the road, helpless. And the last thing we need is some to pass by and demand more of us.

The lawyer got it right in the end. It's all about mercy. The Law demands that we love the unloveable and reach out to help the helpless. And that is exactly what our Good Samaritan has come to do. The Lord Jesus Christ filled with compassion, keeping the Law in all its fullness, has seen you lying there on the side of road on the brink of death, unwilling and unable to ask for help and even at times resisting help, and He has lovingly crossed the barrier between humanity and divinity and saved you. He has had mercy on you, exactly as the the Law demands, and He did it willingly and joyfully. He poured the oil of the Holy Spirit on the gaping wounds of your sin and soothed the pain caused by your guilt. He has poured out the purifying Blood of His sacred veins to purge you of sin and to put your sin and death to death.

No amount of your striving could ever accomplish this. Try as hard as you can, you can't save and heal yourself. But you don't have to. Christ has done that for you. And He continues to do that. As often as you need to hear the peace-giving Word of Absolution, as often as the Law ambushes you and strikes you down, Jesus will speak peace to your conscience. His mercy and compassion will never run out. Christ's called servants will daily administer the Samaritan's gifts until He returns. And on that day, on that glorious day, there will be no more accusation, no more condemnation for all who have received the Samaritan's care in His holy church, his hospital for the dying.

Dear Christian, the Law demands mercy of you. There are no exceptions. Your neighbor is everywhere, anyone who stands in need of your care and compassion. It doesn't matter if they will waste it. They will, just like you waste the care and compassion of your heavenly Father. Your neighbor is sitting next to you in the pew. Your neighbor lives under your roof. Your neighbor lies passed out drunk under a bridge. Your neighbor calls you a

bigot, a racist, a homophobe. Your neighbor seeks to drive you out of the public square. Your neighbor has declared holy war against you and would find no greater pleasure than to see you dead. Have mercy upon them. Because like them, you too were once dead and helpless, caught in your sin and your trespasses.

But the Lord Jesus has stepped down from His throne and shown you mercy, He has raised you to new life and made you an heir of God's kingdom. He didn't do any of that because you deserved it. He certainly didn't do it because you were more worthy than others. He did it because He is your neighbor. You have been loved with an everlasting love. Your Savior has reached down into the filth of your sin and death and covered Himself in them and born the whole burden of your sin Himself without you asking, with your permission, without your thanks. Stop trying to justify yourself. You can't and you will only bring down greater judgment upon yourself and a life of despair. Let the Good Samaritan Jesus justify you with His Blood even as He has already done.

In the Name of +Jesus.