

PENTECOST 8 – July 18, 2010  
Luke 10:25-37  
Pastor Thomas Kneser

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Several weeks ago there was the tragic situation where a 9 year old girl drowned in Lake Michigan while paddling a kayak. In one of the news accounts the reporter made the statement that several “good Samaritans” got involved right away in the search for the girl after her kayak tipped over. Sadly, they were unsuccessful. But it was the reporter’s use of that phrase “good Samaritan” which caught my attention. I knew I was going to be preaching on this parable of Jesus and I wondered just how many people would be knowledgeable of what that phrase meant. The reporter obviously thought most people would know what that means. It comes from this parable of Jesus we want to focus on.

This parable is one of Jesus’ best known, as evidenced by the reporter’s reference to it. But today we want to see that it is also one of the most misunderstood. There are two lessons that it makes, one that even people who know little of the Bible are aware of, as was the case with the news reporter. The other lesson is the one that is easily skipped over, or not really understood by lots of people. So today, let’s learn...

### **THE REAL LESSON OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN**

#### I.

One day, as Jesus was teaching his disciples and others, a certain expert in the laws of the OT asked Jesus the question, **What must I do to inherit eternal life?** This man was one of that group of men who had made the study of the Scriptures their occupation, with special emphasis on the law of Moses. They were considered the experts in interpreting and teaching the law. They viewed the law of God as the only way to become right before God. So it was natural for this lawyer to think about doing something to inherit eternal life.

And by nature we are exactly like him. Our sinful nature likes to think that we can gain salvation by doing something, that if we clean up our lives by right conduct, stay away from the really big sins, God will have to look favorably at us. All of us would ask the question the same way this guy did, **What must I do to inherit eternal life.**

In his answer to this lawyer, Jesus first directs him to the Scriptures in which he was supposed to be the expert. This man had come to Jesus trying to trap him in his words, see if Jesus would say something that went against God’s law. But now our loving Savior begins to turn the tables. He begins the process of trying to rescue this soul from the clutches of Satan. Here was a man whose whole life revolved around God’s law, who mistakenly thought that all the answers to life and salvation could be found in the rules and regulations. So Jesus asked him, **What is written in the law? How do you read it?** It’s not that Jesus didn’t know. He was setting the man up, getting him to the heart of what the law was all about, and whether or not he would get eternal life through the law.

Of course the lawyer knew the answer. He quotes from Deut. 6 and Lev. 19 with words Jesus himself used on other occasions as a summary of the law, **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your would and with all your strength and with all your mind; and , ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**

For the lawyer, that’s how eternal life was to be achieved, by doing, following a prescribed set of rules and regulations, by following a certain code of conduct. Love God with every fiber of your being and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. And that’s absolutely right when it comes to what the law says about eternal life. So Jesus commended the lawyer for his answer.

But then Jesus kind of threw him a curve ball. He told this expert in the law, this man who obviously through he was doing all that the law said, Jesus told him, **Do this and you will live.**

That command, coupled with the man's question, is what this incident is all about. What does the law say about eternal life? It demands perfect love, love toward God every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every week of every month of every year of your entire life. No slip ups, just 100% perfect love and devotion to God. And then along with that, there is that same kind of love to the people around us, showing them the fullest courtesies and kindness in every situation that we would want to be shown, letting them know and showing that their lives are just as important to us as our own. That's what the law says if someone wants to earn eternal life – a complete, perfect, sinless life of obedience to the law of love, even in our thoughts and our words.

Can you do that? Do you think you even come close? That's what Jesus was trying to get this lawyer to think about and to realize, that we just can't produce the perfect love God demands in his law if we expect to earn our way into heaven. Rather, when we look at our lives in the mirror of God's law, we should be convinced of our sinfulness. It should drive us into despair over the fact that we cannot save ourselves, no matter how good a life we live. It should move us to say with the tax collector in another one of Jesus' parables, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." That's where this question and Jesus' answer should lead us and all who fail to live us to the law's demands of perfect and complete love.

But this expert didn't want to admit that he was unable to do it. So Luke tells us, **But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"** He was looking for a way out, implying to Jesus that he had been keeping the law to this point and now just wanted clarification as to who his neighbor was, that there must be limits as to whom he was to show this perfect love.

And the natural mind of man always does that. He wants to find exceptions to the rule so that he can shape God's law to his liking, make it fit his ideas about life. Our sinful nature doesn't want to show love to those who, according to our way of thinking, don't deserve our love. Or we try to say that God's demands must change with our changing society. The lawyer's question is typical of so many people today in that it betrays an attitude that wants to avoid full responsibility. Sinful man looks for every way he can find to get out from under the microscope of God's law of perfect love.

That's why Jesus now tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. The details are familiar. A man is waylaid by robbers, beaten and left for dead. Soon a priest comes by, someone the lawyer would certainly consider his neighbor. But he gets as far to the other side of the road as he can and quickly hurries on. Then a Levite, one of the servants who worked in the Temple, comes and he also passes by on the other side of the road without doing anything. No doubt these men reasoned that they were not obliged to help the victim because he did not deserve their help. In their estimation the man was not a relative or close friend or anyone to whom they owed a favor. They concluded that the man was not their neighbor, not according to their understanding of the law.

Next comes a Samaritan. He belonged to that group of people living in the middle of Palestine who were of mixed race. The Jews considered them to be heathens, people who were outside God's grace and favor even though they did profess to follow the first five books of the OT. The Jews would have nothing to do with them and the feeling was mutual among the Samaritans. This guy could have thought, **THIS INJURED MAN WOULD NEVER HELP ME. WHY SHOULD I HELP HIM? HE'S NOT MY NEIGHBOR!** But instead, the Samaritan acted according to the attitude of one who thinks to himself, **HOW CAN I BE A NEIGHBOR IN THIS SITUATION?** He was moved by compassion for one who desperately needed the help he could

give. His heart did not hold anything back from the man in need. After giving the victim first aid and taking him to an inn, he even paid for continued care, offering to pay more if it was needed. He showed total, complete love and concern for this man who needed help. That's what made him the "Good Samaritan."

The meaning of the parable should be pretty clear. My neighbor is any person whose need is evident to me and to whom I can be of assistance. With this parable Jesus is turning the question of the lawyer around, from "WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?" to "TO WHOM CAN I BE A NEIGHBOR?" By doing so Jesus made the lawyer give an answer that he could not evade. He could not tailor God's law to suit his lifestyle, his prejudices. If he wanted to do something to inherit eternal life, he had to follow the law of love perfectly, down to the last detail. He was to see that the kind of love God's law demands has no limits. It doesn't consider the object to be loved, doesn't consider whether it is worthy to be loved or not, whether it will gain anything by loving. Love simply acts because that's what it is. It is like the sun which shines on all people, not directing only here or there. The law demands perfect love toward God and our fellow man. Only with that perfect love can we save ourselves.

So when Jesus now tells the lawyer, **Go and do likewise**, Jesus wanted him to realize that his heart was not right and so his actions were not right. In this gentle, but firm and effective way Jesus was preaching the law to this man in order to lead him to acknowledge his sinfulness. He was holding up that mirror so that the man could see that he wasn't doing what was necessary to inherit eternal life. The lawyer needed to be looking outside of himself for a solution, find some way to deal with his sins and shortcomings.

That's what the law still says to us today. That's the real lesson to be learned from the parable of the Good Samaritan. If we want to earn our way into heaven, we will have to be the perfect neighbor, showing perfect love to everyone. That would mean helping every person with whom we come into contact as soon as they need that help and giving all the help we can. That would mean using every single opportunity which presents itself without ever passing by on the other side. In our marriages that would mean perfectly following the law of love, husbands loving their wives with the same sacrificing love which Christ displayed and wives submitting to their husbands perfectly. But don't our consciences tell us that we haven't always done that? Like me, you can probably name off the top of your head a dozen times or more when you didn't help when you could have, when you didn't show love for God with every fiber of your being, when your actions demonstrated less than perfect love. Then the parable of the Good Samaritan has fulfilled its real purpose, to get us to see that we fall far short of inheriting eternal life on the basis of our actions.

## II.

So where does that leave us then? What did Jesus want this lawyer to do, if he was leading him to look elsewhere for the answers to eternal life? Jesus wanted him and he wants all of us to look to him. The good news of the Bible is that we should look, not to ourselves and our abilities, but to the one who does demonstrate that perfect love. There is only one Good Samaritan in the truest sense of the parable, and that is Jesus himself. He wanted to lead the lawyer to see that the answer was right in front of him. He was trying to rescue the man from his self-righteousness by inviting him to put his faith in Jesus as the promised Savior. The example of the Samaritan shows that a person's heart, his inner being, must be right before he can begin to do things that are good in God's sight. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ with its message of full and free forgiveness can change a person's heart from its natural self-centeredness into a heart of selfless love and compassion.

Knowing, believing and receiving the love and compassion of Christ is the only way to gain a heart that is devoted to loving and serving others rather than serving yourself. Only when a person has been touched by the good news of forgiveness can we begin to love God with our

whole being, and love our neighbor in the way God wants us to love. We can compare the love of the Samaritan to the love and compassion which God's Son, our Savior, has shown to us. He held nothing back from helping us in our desperate and helpless condition. We are the victims of sin's treachery. It leaves us more than half dead on the road to hell. But he came along, came into this world, and gave his all to rescue us, to restore us to spiritual health and vitality. He laid down his life to give us what the lawyer was looking for, eternal life. His was perfect love in action, a gift of pure grace.

This familiar parable was told for two reasons. Yes, it tells us that we are to be helpful to everyone, that we are to be neighbors at all times to anyone who needs our help. That's an important part of our lives as Christians, practicing the law of perfect love, love for God and for our fellowman. I don't have to list all the different ways for you to do that. Watch for them. Take advantage of them. Be a good Samaritan, as those who attempted the rescue of that little girl. Let all our acts of kindness, love and charity be motivated by that perfect love which God has shown toward us.

But always remember what the real lesson of the Good Samaritan is. It points us to our sins and then to the one who is the best and only "Good" Samaritan, our Savior Jesus. He has saved us from our sins, covered all our spiritual expenses, given us the healing of full and free forgiveness. Let his love, his gift of eternal life, be the driving force behind our lives of love and service to him and to others. God help us in that. AMEN.