

Luke 10:25-37 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—Series C)
 “Justified By Christ to Love Others”
 Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT
 July 10, 2022

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Gospel Reading from Luke 10:

²⁵And behold, an expert in religious law stood up, testing [Jesus], saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶And He said to him, “In the Law, what is written? How do you read it?”

²⁷And he answered and said, “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and with your whole self and with your whole strength and with your whole mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

²⁸And He said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

The expert in God’s Law wanted to justify himself. He wanted to say that he was righteous. He wanted it to be known that he was absolved of sin because he had obviously loved God with everything he had. But this man knows that if he claims he does love God with his whole heart, self, strength, and mind, he should love his neighbor as well. He tries to deflect attention away from himself by implying that the Law is the problem, that God’s Law is unclear. He needs to clarify who is “neighbor” and who is not. He wants a division between “us” and “them.” To justify himself, the question is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” This implies that there are some people who are **not** my neighbor. What kind of people would Jesus exclude from the category of “neighbor” so that this man might be just and right?

Justifying ourselves is something we are preoccupied with all the time. We are always maintaining that we are right, especially when other people say that we are wrong. At work, in our casual conversations, in our relationships with others, we are always defending ourselves, making excuses, scoring points, and seeking approval. We insist that we are right. And so is the other person or group who insists that we are wrong. Underlying the

need to be justified is our yearning for approval, for affirmation, for thinking that our existence matters in some positive way, for our need to think that our life is worthwhile. That we all are engaged in justifying ourselves is an understandable, normal part of being human. Of course, we are not always right and are often wrong—though we continue to justify ourselves—creating all kinds of inner turmoil. The problem, though, is that we are trying to justify ourselves.¹

“Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole self, with your whole strength, and with your whole mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” The whole of God’s Law given through Moses is summarized by Jesus in Matthew 22. When asked, “What is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments this way: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37–40 ESV). To inherit eternal life, which is another way of saying, to be saved from sin and death, is to “do this,” love God and love neighbor. “Do this and you will live.”

Immediately, then, comes the need to justify himself. Loving God is one thing, but who is my neighbor? God certainly doesn’t mean for this man to love those Samaritans or any other outsiders, like Gentiles, right? And yet, in Jesus’ story, it is the hated Samaritan who

¹ Gene Veith, “Justifying Ourselves,” *Cranach, the Blog of Veith*, February 23, 2015, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2015/02/justifying-ourselves/>

fulfills the Law of loving his neighbor as himself, and not the priest or the Levite, those at the top of the legal expert's "neighbors to be loved" list.

The man believes that he must be right in his thinking. He wants Jesus to confirm this way of thinking. Cross the unlovables off the list, Jesus. Show everyone how just and right I truly am as an expert in the Law. But the man cannot be justified in his thinking and lack of love for certain people. Since he does not truly love his neighbor as himself, he does not truly love God. He cannot. We read in James 2, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:8–10 ESV). And St. John writes in his first letter, chapter 4, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20–21 ESV).

How much are we like the expert in the Law? How often do you and I look to justify ourselves in light of God's clear Word? "Well, I'm not perfect, but I'm not as bad as so-and-so." "I go to church once in a while, but God can't actually expect me to show love to the likes of her." "He's absolutely unlovable. Just look at what he does with his life. He's a useless existence. Glad I'm not like him."

"Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole self, with your whole strength, and with your whole mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Do this, and you will live. The expert in the Law didn't and couldn't "do this." You and I haven't and can't "do this."

On this side of heaven, you and I will never have perfect love for God with all our heart, self, strength, and mind. You and I will never have perfect love for our neighbor (who is anyone to whom we can show love and mercy.) No matter what we come up with in terms of justifying ourselves, it will never justify us, which means to make us right before God. Romans 3:20, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20 ESV).

It is the knowledge that we have truly fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). It is the knowledge that I cannot by my own reason or strength fear, love, and trust in God above all things nor can I love my neighbor. In my sinful condition, I love only myself, for that is the very nature of sin. The Law says, "Do this: love God and love your neighbor." But Jesus' answer is that neither we nor the legal expert can do this, for we are dead in our sins. We are selfish and by nature unloving. What we need is someone to love us, show mercy to us, heal us, pay for us, give us lodging, and revive us. We need a "Good Samaritan." And we have One indeed!

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, associated with sinners. He ate with tax collectors. He was despised because of this by the religious leaders, including the legal expert. But Jesus is the One who fulfills God's Law on behalf of sinful humanity. He alone is the One who brings God's mercy to selfish, loveless sinners the world over who cannot fulfill God's Law of love. Jesus says to you, "I am your neighbor and will give you the gifts of mercy, healing, and life. As I live in you, you will have life and will do mercy—not motivated by laws and definitions,

but animated by my love.”² And God’s Word tell us, “By this the love of God is revealed in us: that God has sent his one and only Son into the world so that we may live through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9–10 NET).

Jesus acted as the Good Samaritan for you. “Jesus went on to the cross in an unbroken unity of love for God and all His half-dead neighbors and fulfilled it.”³ He had lived a perfect life under God’s Law, loving God and fallen humanity with a perfect love. Jesus loved His Father perfectly unto the death of the cross. He loved sinners more than His own life and gave it up to the hellish death of the cross so that all who should believe in Jesus Christ shall not perish but will indeed inherit the gift of eternal life. God the Father has declared us right and just because of the merits of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for us. Your sins and mine, all of our failures to love God and neighbor, stand forgiven in the blood of the Savior. There is no justifying ourselves. There is only God in Christ declaring us not guilty of sin, declaring us right because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. You and I are “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24 ESV).

Rather than us trying to justify ourselves according to our words and behaviors and failing, God has declared us to be just and right through Jesus Christ by His mercy and grace. By having Jesus be a Good Samaritan to us, we are now enabled and empowered to love God

² Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 454.

³ Walter H. Roehrs and Martin H. Franzmann, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*, electronic ed., vol. 2 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1998), 69.

and to be Good Samaritans to others, to be a neighbor to everyone in need of mercy and help. The very Law of love becomes the Christian's guide as we live the new life given to us by grace through faith.

What does that new life look like lived in love? We need only look at the Commandments as a guide. By the power of the Holy Spirit, declared righteous in Christ, we do love the Lord our God with all of our being. It's a love created in us by God Himself, "not by works, lest anyone should boast." Because God in Christ loves us, we also love one another as we honor father, mother, and other authorities; as we faithfully represent God the Father in disciplining and caring for our children, teaching them the Christian faith; as we through the power of the Spirit reject hatred and anger toward others, controlling our tempers, and not neglecting the light of the helpless; as we are faithful to the responsibilities of our vocations; as we put the best construction on everything rather than taking part in gossip and rumors; as we work to maintain harmony.

While these are very general in nature, it's in the living of our everyday lives where the flesh gets put on these bare bones. It's in the living out of the Christian life of faith and love empowered by the Spirit that you love and serve others in the name of Jesus, whom you represent as a Christian. And in the love we show to our neighbors, we also give them the love of Jesus which becomes theirs in the Good News of His life, death, and resurrection that takes away their sins, that removes their guilt, and quiets their conscience with the peace of God.

By God's grace through faith in Jesus, we stand righteous before the Lord because of the work of Jesus Christ. We are justified. And through the power of the Spirit working

through the Gospel and the Sacraments of Christ we are able to recognize who our neighbor is; recognize our neighbor's needs; love our neighbor as ourself, as Christ loves us; repent when we fail to love and show mercy; receive again the forgiveness and rightness of God through Word and Sacrament; and repeat until Christ gathers us to Himself or He comes again. Amen.