

Sermon Draft for July 13, 2025

Text: Luke 10:25–37

Sermon: “My Neighbor”

When the Gospel is as familiar both in the church and in secular society and is as powerful as the parable of the Good Samaritan, it clearly sets the tone for the day. **“Love your neighbor.”** (Luke 10:27–28). Everyone, even our legal system, is familiar with the concept of being a Good Samaritan.

“Desiring to justify himself, [the expert in the Law] said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (v 29).

We can never forget or ignore why Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. It all has to do with a lawyer, an expert in the Law or Torah of Moses. He doesn’t come with good intentions. He’s come **“to put [Jesus] to the test”** (v 25), to tempt him. The lawyer is doing the very thing Jesus says not to do when he says to the devil:

“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Luke 4:12).

In fact, it's worse than that. The lawyer asks a follow-up question. He did so not because he really wanted to know who his neighbor was. It wasn't because he wanted to know how best to love his neighbor or how to be the best neighbor he could be. No, ***“he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”***

It's no innocent question. It all has to do with “justification.” What does justify mean? ***“It means to be pronounced righteous”*** (AP V 131). It means to be declared innocent of all charges before God. We could also say that ***“justification is the forgiveness of sins”*** (AP V 169). ***“People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By his death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in his sight”*** (AC IV 2–3).

To understand Jesus' parable, we can't lose sight of this! The parable has everything to do with the questions that the expert of the law asked Jesus. They are no innocent questions. He's putting Jesus to the test in order to justify himself. We are not justified, innocent, or forgiven by ourselves, but rather by Jesus alone. It all has to do with what Jesus does for us and not, thank God, what we do for Jesus or for our neighbor.

But that's hard for us to remember because old Adam is always trying to justify himself before God. It's hard to remember because our flesh, our body, our mind, our desires, make it so we only ever tend to think of old Adam as kind of a "frat boy." Which means we only recognize him when he's living a sinful lifestyle. ***"The works of the flesh are evident,"*** Paul says (Galatians 5:19).

But old Adam is very religious in his sin. He believes the lie of the devil: ***"You will be like God, knowing good and evil"*** (Genesis 3:5).

So, he runs around dividing good from evil, according to his standards working, striving according to his own homespun righteousness. Old Adam is often moral. He could be the Pharisee from another parable. He might be hypocritical, like indignant David before Nathan tells him that he is the man. Old Adam moves to his own religious observance, like Saul thinking he could buy God's favor by making a sacrifice God had said only priests were allowed to offer. Old Adam is the moral leader, the one who's better than others, the Volvo-driving soccer mom.

Old Adam lives apart from the Lord. He tries to gain life without the Lord's help by works of the Law! He adds sin to sin. Works and God's Law don't save. ***“Do this, and you will live”*** (v 28). But he doesn't! That's the point. ***“By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin”*** (Romans 3:20).

We are all legal beings at heart. “Who’s my neighbor?” Who indeed? We know who they are. We know the people for whom we are supposed to be neighbor. And maybe we are to their faces. Always calculating: “This girl,” “that guy” isn’t my neighbor because she’s that way, he’s this way, did this certain thing, wronged me in some certain way.

Old Adam lives how he wants, then sets up all sorts of standards and measurements so that he’s forgiven and righteous. And it may not have anything to do with the Lord. We do it so often we don’t even realize it! Like the lawyer in Jesus’ day: “Of course Jews don’t have to love Samaritans! What? A Samaritan loved a Jew?” Well, actually he didn’t even acknowledge the name “Samaritan”: **“The one, I suppose,”** he called him.

Or we use the Lord’s gifts to justify ourselves! We quantify, we calculate, we self-justify. We legalize the Lord’s Word and his Sacraments.

Instead of faith being the only thing that prepares us for the Sacrament, as the Small Catechism clearly teaches from God's Word, we parade vague, often self-defined, "preparation." Or another old Adam trick: to say he believes the confession of sins but really doesn't, because if he did, it might mean he needs the Lord's Supper more. The Sacrament is poison to old Adam because it's eternal life to our new person in Christ.

If all else fails, old Adam will just decide that he's better than others, because, after all, he's doing a good work by receiving the Supper. But nothing we do can make us righteous before God and earn us eternal life. If we claim our good works make us righteous,

"what else is this than to transfer Christ's glory to our works? It means we would please God because of our works, not because of Christ. But this robs Christ of the glory of being the Mediator.

He is the Mediator forever, and not merely in the beginning of

justification" (AP V 196). We are only ever justified by faith alone in

Christ alone.

The Law doesn't give life. That's what the stand-ins for the Law in Jesus' parable show. What help did the priest and Levite provide the man in need of healing and life? None. So also works. Old Adam will think someone has faith or is saved because of things they've done, even though they absent themselves from Jesus and his Word and gifts. ***“If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose”*** (Galatians 2:21b).

We are all justified beings by faith in Christ and what he has done for us. Yes, “the Law says, ‘Do this,’ and it is never done.” But “faith says, ‘Believe in Christ,’ and everything is already done” (Heidelberg Disputation). Against our sins stands Jesus' blood and cross.

Against our works stand his good works in our place. Credited to our account. Received by faith alone. There is no alternative. It's either by works or by faith. If it's faith and works, our works become more important than Christ. ***“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”*** (Romans 3:28).

The Lord's Word and gifts to such destitute, dead, dying sinners are completely free gifts. We haven't and we never can earn them or deserve them. The Lord gives them exactly because we can't earn them, because we are unworthy and in desperate need. Like the Samaritan in the parable with the oil and wine. Freely bestowed because of a need! And so also with the Lord's Supper, we can trust Jesus' judgment about our need, trust his gift, trust his Word, his blood not only shed for us at Calvary but placed into our mouth at Communion.

Today's text is all about these things, because Jesus told this parable to a lawyer who wanted to justify himself. But our Good Samaritan Jesus justifies us, and, thank God, we don't!

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”

(Romans 4:5).

In the name of Jesus. Amen.