

Leaving the Legal Profession

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 | Psalm 25:1-10 | Colossians 1:1-14 | Luke 10:25-37

LUKE 10:25-37

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ ²⁷ He answered, ‘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 your neighbour as yourself.’ ²⁸ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’ ²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ ³⁰ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

INTRODUCTION

Henry VI, Part 2, Act IV, Scene 2. The pretender to the throne, Jack Cade, and his band of murderous rascals are whimsically, if not mockingly, contemplating an ideal society. Jack offers this picture: “I thank you, good people: there shall be no money; all shall eat and drink on my score; and I will apparel them all in one livery, that they may agree like brothers, and worship me their lord.” And adding to this glorious picture, one of his henchman, offers one of Shakespeare’s most famous lines: “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”¹

Setting aside how you or I may personally feel about lawyers, and of course excepting any lawyers present, the line is clearly a joke. In their farcical imagining of utopia, they want to be rid of the lawyers. And yet, there is a fervent community of people who interpret this line rather differently. *These* readers insist that lawyers are the guardians of all that is good and so stand in the way of Jack and his bandits, noble protectors of a functioning society. It is rather impressive sophistry that gets you to that reading, even for an Anglican. And these interpreters are, unsurprisingly, lawyers.² Lawyers, you see, have a way of wrangling over words that can be infuriating to many, and yet remarkably effective, always pressing their advantage. And it is a lawyer that is at the centre of our Gospel reading this morning. In this parable, Jesus helps this lawyer to learn an important lesson, legal recourse is no match for God’s grace. Let’s take a look.

1. LEGAL MEANS

You may already be familiar with the parable: the good Samaritan. It’s one of Jesus’ classics. And the lesson in the parable seems quite clear. We should be like the Samaritan man and

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 2, IV.2.*

² See, for example, Seth Finkelstein, “‘The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers’ – It’s a Lawyer Joke” *The Ethical Spectacle*, July 1997. See spectacle.org/797/finkel.html.

engage in acts of mercy and care for even those we are predisposed to despise, possibly on ethnic grounds—since Samaritans and Jews had a long-held cultural divide. It’s a powerful message for a society as divided as ours.

But reading closely, there is something more going on here than just the parable. If we look just a bit earlier in the text, we will see something perhaps unexpected. Jesus has been going about his ministry when he’s approached by a lawyer. The lawyer asks Jesus: “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*”³ It’s a natural question for human beings. We want to know about what is beyond death, about how we might be a part of something that transcends this life. But according to Luke, this lawyer’s question is not simply a philosophical query. It is a test.⁴ And inherent in the question is a supposed answer. The translation here obscures it a little. Literally, he asks: ‘what must I do to *legally inherit* eternal life.’ This explains Jesus’ otherwise curious response about the law: what does the law tell you to do? The lawyer responds... and because he’s a lawyer, he’s also probably billing Jesus for this conversation... he responds with the summary of the law and prophets: ‘love God and love your neighbour.’ Jesus tells him, ‘that’s right. Go do it.’⁵

But then the lawyer, unsatisfied with the answer and still looking for that loophole that will allow him to gain eternal life without the effort of keeping the whole law all the time, asks another question: “*And who is my neighbour?*”⁶ Luke adds an important characterization here. The man was trying to justify himself. He was trying to earn eternal life by means of keeping the law, and so, as a good lawyer, wanted clearly defined parameters. ‘If I have to love my neighbour, then tell me who my neighbour is. I will make the effort to love him or her, and nobody else. Transaction complete. You can put my ticket for eternal life in the mail.’

2. LEGAL IMPOSSIBILITY

It is at this point that Jesus tells the parable. But now we are ready to understand the reason Jesus tells it. It is more than an encouragement to be charitable. The ending is quite odd if that is the only purpose. “*Go and do likewise,*”⁷ is a strange exhortation to a Jewish lawyer. ‘Go and be like a Samaritan? Go and be like our cultural enemies?’ This is unthinkable—impossible even. It certainly would *not* have motivated this lawyer or inspired him to good works.

But then consider the parable itself. The first two visitors to the man who had been stripped, beaten, and left for dead were a priest and a Levite. Both are religious workers in the Temple and, more importantly, bound by strict ritual purity laws—the kind of laws that prevent touching or even going near a bleeding, possibly dead man. And so, they acted with the law on their side: avoiding the carnage of the robbery. But, and this is Jesus’ point, their commitment to the law prevented them from keeping the law of humanity, from humanely, mercifully, showing grace to this nearly dead man. Jesus is, in wonderfully Socratic fashion, pinning the lawyer down. He’s saying: ‘Do you really think that you are capable of keeping the law to the point of earning eternal life? You can’t even reconcile your commitment to ritual purity laws with the simple act of showing grace to a man in desperate need.’ Remember, the lawyer is testing Jesus and trying to justify himself according to the law. And Jesus is showing him that

³ Luke 10:25.

⁴ Again, Luke 10:25. For Luke’s portrayal of lawyers in general, see Luke 7Z:28-40 and 11:45-52.

⁵ Luke 10:28.

⁶ Luke 10:29.

⁷ Luke 10:37.

the law is *not* going to save him—something we have seen a few times in our readings in the last few weeks. Luke builds on this theme with the next passage as well, in which Martha is challenged in her commitment to good hospitality while her sister, Mary, is commended for placing herself at Jesus’ feet. Mary understood what this lawyer did not—the law and the rules, even the rules of well-meaning hospitality, are not going to gain you eternal life. Nobody is capable of justifying himself according to the law. Something more is needed. Impossible grace is needed. Jesus, the supreme example of impossible grace, is needed. In fact, this is the gospel. Jesus, at great cost to himself—death on a cross—saves us in our weakened, nearly dead state of sinfulness.⁸ And the law is not our salvation. Jesus is. So, stop looking to the law for eternal life. Look to the one who provides impossible grace... and then, only then, go and do likewise.

CONCLUSION

“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”⁹ Shakespeare is right. But here is the thing: There is a lawyer in each of us. There is a tendency in each of us to want to justify himself or herself. ‘Of course, I am a good person. I do good things. And even when I do bad things, I make up for it. I might be tempted to take my anger out on people. But I make up for it by being nice later. I might be tempted toward sins of the flesh, but I show restraint. I look, but I don’t touch. I might be a little dishonest in my work, but I make up for it by giving to charity. I might harbour hatred and judgmentalism in my heart, but I balance it out by going to church twice per month.’ It’s incredibly easy to adopt this transactional mindset. ‘What penance must I do? What indulgence must I purchase? What good deed must I complete to please God so that he is bound by legal agreement to give me eternal life?’

“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” We have to kill the lawyer inside of us. And in fact, this is precisely what Paul imagined as he composed Romans, chapter 6:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.¹⁰

Christ died to free us from the condemnation of the law. We no longer need to live to justify ourselves by it. But live as those who have been shown grace. And so, stop the negotiations in your head, the trades of good deeds for sins. It’s just too easy to keep doing it, to keep rationalizing, to keep earning, to keep thinking my value is in what I do and what benefit I am, even as a benefit to others. My value, and your value, is in the purchase price—the very body

⁸ See Philippians 2:5-11.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 2*, IV.2.

¹⁰ Romans 6:6-14.

and blood of Jesus Christ. And so, start living as one under grace, not the law. Then, then we can go together and show the grace of Jesus Christ to the whole world.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, we know ourselves to need your generosity so that we might be in relationship to you. Thank you for giving us your Son, the one who rescued us from death at great cost. May we follow him. Give us the strength to go and do likewise. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*