

You can tell what someone thinks Christianity is all about by how they understand the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Christianity, for many people, is about being nice, helping those in need, loving people, being good. Like many today, the lawyer sees the goal of inheriting eternal life as easily achievable. Do good to people, treat them the way you want to be treated. The well-known Parable today seems to sum all this up – that this is the model of how we are to live – that the point of this text is “Be like the Good Samaritan.”

It’s easy to forget though, that the Parable is not just about one stranger helping another. It’s about a man coming to the aid of another, when every fiber of his being, when all the cultural mores press this Samaritan, to ignore the injured man because they are enemies. Were the roles reversed, it would be every fiber of the Judean’s body, every social convention he knew, that would tell him to ignore the bleeding, dying Samaritan. But the Samaritan comes to the aid of “**the man who fell among the robbers,**” cares for him at his own expense. With the popular use of the Good Samaritan, it easily escapes us how that name, Samaritan, would have, was intended to, grate upon the ears of Jesus’ hearers. If you want some sense of what Jesus is getting at, just say “the Good North Korean,” or, “the Good Taliban.” For those of you who grew up during the Cold War and remember practicing duck-and-cover, this is “the Good Russian.”

What the Law demands is perfect love and care at your expense. Not just for your friends, but for your enemies. This is the command of the Old Testament reading today. Love your neighbor. There’s nothing there about whether you like him or not. Jesus teaches this as well; He makes His expectation perfectly clear. “**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?**” (Matt 5:44, 46–47). He says similarly elsewhere: “**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you**” (Lk 6:27–28).

But that is not the only demand. It is not just in relation to one another that God has His holy expectations. It’s easy to miss the vertical aspect: our life with God. Notice, when Jesus tells the lawyer after he sums up the Law correctly, “**Do this, and you will live,**” the lawyer thinks he’s fine when it comes to loving God with everything he’s got. It’s just the whole loving your neighbor thing that he needs to weasel his way out of. We are not so different. We measure how we’re doing on the horizontal realm. “I don’t murder. I don’t swear. I don’t defraud or cheat my neighbor. I come to the aid of people that I see who need help.” Let me ask you, do you “**love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind**”? We will easily say, “Of course I do, that’s easy!” But consider, what does this look like, when we love God the way we ought? Here’s an example: Husbands, you love your wife. You speak with her, you spend time with her every day because you love her. You are to love God more than you love your wife. Do you spend time with Him in His Word, do you speak to Him in prayer near as much as you spend time with and talk with your wife? Do you teach your children to love God this way, to value Him more than anything else?

If the point of today’s Parable is simply to make clearer the demand that is placed on you, to get you to commit to do better, to tell you, “Just try even harder,” it is hard to see how Jesus could say the words at the beginning of today’s Gospel when He turns to the disciples and says, “**Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.**” The prophets and kings lived under the Law of Sinai, that harsh pedagogue, that firm instructor that had no qualms about corporal punishment when a toe was set over the line. St. Paul makes clear in the Epistle, the law was not given to give life, but to imprison under sin, to expose and show the impossibility of inheriting eternal life by obedience to what God commands. The standard given in Leviticus of being holy as the Lord God is holy, was not, could not, cannot be met by us.

Just consider how the children of Israel saw all of God’s wonders in Egypt, walked through the Red Sea on dry ground, saw those same waters close over Pharaoh’s chariots, drank of bitter water made sweet, ate bread from heaven every day. And just after they received God’s holy Ten Commandments, where God Himself spoke to them and said, “**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them...**” (Ex 20:1–4), while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the rest of God’s instructions for His people,

what did they do? They had Aaron make “**a golden calf. And they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’**” (Ex 32:4).

Is Jesus, then, simply saying that the disciples are blessed above these, because now it’s God Himself as a Man giving the instructions for what we are to do? Is that what makes those who saw and heard Jesus with their own eyes and ears so blessed? No! Being told what you ought to do does not give the ability to do it. The heart and center of Christianity, of the Bible, of what both the Old and New Testaments teach, is not obedience to the Law, of doing enough good works to force God to let you into eternal life. As the parable shows, the Priest and Levite, the embodiment of the Law, could not come to the man’s aid. The answer God gave in the very beginning to the problem of sin and our captivity to the devil was not “Do these things and you’ll get back on the straight and narrow. Do this, and you will make yourself free from sin” God gave the promise of the Savior, the child born of woman who would suffer injury and yet crush Satan’s head.

That is what the prophets and kings spoke of, hoped in, and longed for. Like us, they knew their sin, the consequence of death, and the threat of eternal condemnation. And yet they “encouraged and comforted themselves by the preaching about the woman’s seed, who would bruise the Serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15); Abraham’s seed, in whom ‘all the nations of the earth [will] be blessed’ (Genesis 22:18); David’s Son, who should ‘bring back the preserved of Israel’ and be ‘a light for the nations’ (Isaiah 49:6; see also Palm 110:1; Luke 2:32), and who ‘was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities...and with His stripes we are healed’ (Isaiah 53:5)” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VI, 23).

The Old Testament is not about salvation by works. It is about the promise of salvation through the Messiah. Jesus says the disciples are blessed because they see not just with the eyes of faith, but with the eyes of their bodies they behold the deliverance in full of that promise in the flesh. They hear the very Messiah speak, not through the ecstatic visions or pens of the prophets, but with His own incarnate voice. In Jesus, the God of Israel shows how it is that eternal life is given, how it is that all your sins against God and neighbor are atoned for, the guilt taken away, how it is that perfect righteousness is given.

The divine Stranger “**came to His own and His own people did not receive Him.**” He was the hated, despised one, and yet He did not count it beneath Himself to get into the muck and mire which held you, to dirty Himself with your sin, to take the filth of your blood up onto Himself, to lay down all that He had, not just gold or silver, but His very life, to pour into your wounds the healing balm of His Holy Spirit and the cleansing flood of His blood. He entrusts you into the care of His innkeepers in the house of His holy Church. He is the one, the only one, like no other, who has “**proved to be neighbor**” to you. There is no other person who can do this for you. The Law cannot do this for you. Your poor attempts at making excuses or ignoring what God plainly says is sin cannot help you. Only the unique work of Jesus.

It is on the basis of this that Jesus does then say to those who hear Him, “**Go, and do likewise.**” The love of Christ is to be imitated and reflected in His children. They take the Gospel with them, witnessing to the mercy of God and the compassion of God in their words and deeds. Those whom Christ found half-dead and saved out of His boundless, incomparable love are filled with that love which they have received. You love those whom Christ loves. You are not like the pagans, the Gentiles, who only love those who love them back. You are a Christian. you love like Jesus. You are God’s people, you are holy, for He the LORD who is your God is holy and has made you so.

Hearing this doesn’t make Christians self-righteous, as though Jesus’s words corrupt faith with works-righteousness. Faith embraces the truth of what Jesus says. Faith embraces who you are in Christ. Christians actually do want to be like Jesus! A young son wants to do what his father does, he mimics him, walks around the house wearing his dad’s shoes. Your attempts in this life are imperfect because you are still infected with sin. The good work begun in you is not yet complete. Spiritual maturity, perfection, is never achieved in this life. We are always too small to fill those shoes which only Christ can and has perfectly filled. This is far different from saying you can do no good at all. God’s good will for what you should do will always show you that you have not lived up to it. But you do not despair. Remember that your Father loves you, that Jesus died for you, that you are bought and paid for and can’t be snatched away. Repent and rejoice. Be filled with the Holy Spirit who does not just bring you Jesus’ forgiveness in the Holy Sacrament, but who also gives you His life; the strength not just to believe, but also to live and to love.

This is what it is to be a Christian.