

Lawyers for Our Own Mistakes, Judges for Others'

Text: Luke 10:23-29

Hymn: "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me" (LSB 683)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan. Perhaps among all the parables that our Lord told, this is the most familiar. In some research that's been done, it was found that forty-nine percent of the people polled said they knew the story of the Good Samaritan and 45% of them thought they knew the story well enough that if they were asked to tell it themselves they would be able to do so. We have the name "Good Samaritan" all over the place—on churches and on hospitals. We even have "Good Samaritan" laws that protect you from being sued for attempting to help someone in need.

A very popular parable, one of the most quoted parables, but also one of the most misunderstood and misapplied. Most people think Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan simply to teach us that we are to do good to one another. But that's not why Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. That we are to do good for one another is one of the side benefits of the parable, to be sure. But that's not the real reason Jesus told it. It's really a story that tells us and the man in the text about our inability to do the good that we should do and then it tells about our attempt to excuse ourselves for not doing the good that we should do. That's indicated by the words that come just before, where it says that he, the lawyer, *desiring to justify himself*, said to Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" We are all self-justifiers. St. Paul says we have this innate ability within ourselves where at first we accuse but then excuse ourselves (Rom 2:15). Self-justification. We haven't done this or we did do that, but here's the reason. How often we in our lives are justly accused of a wrong by our own conscience

or by someone else and our minds go into high gear to rationalize our actions. We are masters at inventing reasons to justify our sinful behavior.

And we've been this way since we were little children. A battle breaks out between siblings and the first thing that happens when parents come down to settle the situation, one of them points to the other and says, "He made me do it" or "She said such-and-such and I simply responded." Passing the blame, justifying ourselves. Teenagers attempt to justify their disobedience by reminding parents of some bill of rights which they and their peers found who knows where. Adults attempt to justify their breaking of laws, their breaking of contracts, their breaking of hearts, their breaking of promises to God and to each other. Nations attempt to justify their hostility to other nations and also their accommodation to social evils of every kind.

We are a race of self-justifiers and the world and its children are our victims. We even try to justify ourselves before God. So there's little wonder that the lawyer in our text asks the question that he does, What must I do to inherit eternal life? Really the question is what must I do to justify myself? What must I do? He knew he was not going to get eternal life just by being a human being. He rightly knew that it wasn't a natural extension of his life here on earth that he was going to have the blessings of being with God forever. He knew that that wasn't the case or else he wouldn't have asked, What must I do? In essence, What I must I do to justify myself? He knew that something had to be done in order to put him in a position where he would be justified before God. His mistake, of course, was in thinking that he was the one to do it.

To that direct question Jesus gives a direct answer. He says, "I'll tell you what you must do. You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and

all your mind and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself. If you want to justify yourself in God's eyes, that's what you must do." Immediately the lawyer saw the trap into which he had gotten himself. There was no way he had loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He had placed his own desires before God's desires. He knew that. Many times He had placed his own agenda ahead of God's agenda. He had tried to remake God into his own image so he could do the things he wanted to when he wanted to do them. So many times he had partitioned off a part of his heart, giving God a small portion of heart, but giving his desires, often his own sinful desires, the greater portion—his pleasures, his goals, his ambition. If Jesus had simply said, You must love God with your heart and your soul and your mind, the lawyer would have left feeling good about himself. But one three-letter word makes the difference. That little word "all" did this lawyer in. And it's emphasized by showing up four times.

That's exactly the conclusion the Lord wanted the lawyer to reach, that, no, he could not possibly justify himself. Because of our sinful condition it's impossible for us to gain salvation for ourselves. That's why St. Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Jesus had this lawyer where he wanted him. He had him on his knees, stripped of self-righteousness, knowing he couldn't earn heaven. And our Lord was all set to lovingly pick this lawyer up and say, "Now that you have finally looked away from yourself, look to me, come to me, you who labor and are heavy laden, laden with sins, and I will give you rest. I'll take your sins on myself. I'll pay for your sins on the Cross and I'll give you my righteousness, my sinlessness, my perfection. And now go home, be free."

How much our Lord must have desired to share His righteousness with that man! But before he could, the lawyer had to entertain one more question. Like something out of Perry Mason or Legally Blonde, the lawyer basically shouts, "Objection, objection!" Instead of accepting the righteousness Jesus came to offer, he, *desiring to justify himself*, asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

Now the lawyer was trying to sidetrack Jesus; after all these years we shouldn't let his question sidetrack us. We know who our neighbors are. Our neighbor is anyone who is near unto us. He knew that as well as we know it. Don't be sidetracked by that second question so that you forget the first one: "What must I do to justify myself?" Because the good news of this great parable is simply this: God has provided our justification for us. What must you do to have eternal life, to be justified? That's not the question to ask. The question to ask is, What has God done to justify me? Jesus Christ is your justification. Christ by His suffering and death is our justifier, God says. He is the one who justifies us and He is justified who has faith in Jesus Christ. We are justified by God's grace through the redemption which is ours in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:24). Being justified by His blood we are saved from the wrath of God (Rom 5:9). Don't try to justify yourself the way the lawyer did. You can't possibly succeed, no matter how good a person you are. Consider the words Job: "If I try to justify myself, my own mouth shall condemn me" (Job 9:20). And that's just what happened to the lawyer in our text. Trying to justify himself, he only dug his hole deeper. He didn't love the Lord completely as he should. And his own words ended up condemning him. That's what the story of the Good Samaritan is really all about. It's certainly not about our justifying ourselves by our own piety; even our own caring for

one another, as important as caring for our neighbors in need is. It's really about what God has done for us, what Christ, who is the real Good Samaritan, has done to deliver us from Satan and his thugs, who beat us down and left us dead in the ditch, what Christ has done to breathe his life into us and then to bathe us and cleanse in the baptismal waters, as he did for little Rumi this morning, to carry us into his church where we're cared for and nourished by his very Body and Blood until He comes again and receives us then to Himself.

It's not about morality. It's not even about piety and the piety of the Good Samaritan. If it's not passing by a half-dead stranger that exposes our failure to love our neighbor as ourselves, it's not being civil to our uncle with the crazy political views or not forgiving the friend who wronged us fifteen years ago or not praying for our enemies. No, the Good Samaritan is about the justifying work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a character in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Liza Hamilton. She's the matriarch of her family, this pugnacious advocate of Biblical morality. Early in the book she's described this way:

Her total intellectual association was the Bible...In that one book she had her history and her poetry, her knowledge of people and things, her ethics, her morals, and her salvation. She never studied the Bible or inspected it; she just read it...[F]inally she came to a point where she knew it so well that she went right on reading it without listening.

"She went right on reading it without listening." When we hear today's Scripture lesson, it's easy to read it quickly and then to move on because it's so familiar. "Oh, the Good Samaritan; I know what that's all about. It's about being good to one another." Listen. Listen carefully. Because it's really what God in Christ, who ultimately is the Good Samaritan, has really done to justify you.

