

Answering the Greatest Question
Luke 10:25-37

On March 27, 1964 the New York Times ran the following story:

“At approximately 3:20 on the morning of March 13, 1964, 28 year old (Kitty) Genovese was returning to her home in a nice middle-class area of Queens, NY. She parked her car in a nearby parking lot, turned off the lights and started the walk to her second floor apartment some 35 yards away. She got as far as a streetlight when a man grabbed her. She screamed. Lights went on in the 10 floor apartment building nearby. She yelled, “... he stabbed me! Please help me!” Windows opened in the apartment building and a man’s voice shouted, “Let that girl alone.” The attacker looked up, shrugged and walked off down the street. Ms. Genovese struggled to get to her feet. Lights went back off in the apartments. The attacker came back and stabbed her again. She again cried out, “I’m dying! I’m dying!” And again the lights came on and windows opened in many of the nearby apartments. The assailant again left and got into his car and drove away. Ms Genovese staggered to her feet as a city bus drove by. It was now 3:35a.m. The attacker returned once again. He found her in a doorway at the foot of the stairs and he stabbed her a third time – this time with a fatal consequence. It was 3:50 when the police received the first call. They responded quickly and within two minutes were at the scene. Ms Genovese was already dead.”

Her name would become symbolic in the public mind for a dark side of the national character. It would stand for Americans who were too indifferent or too frightened or too alienated or too self-absorbed to get involved in helping a fellow human being in dire trouble. Detectives investigating the murder discovered that a dozen of her neighbors had witnessed at least one of her killer’s three attacks but had neither come to her aid nor called the police.

Martin Gansberg, who wrote the article, said her screams pierced through to a place where there is no space and time, only the pain of living in a city that too often does not care. “It awakened people to the fact that bad things were happening and they were doing nothing about it.”

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 10:25-37, a very familiar passage. Jesus is now just a few months away from the cross. He and His disciples have been traveling from town to town in Galilee calling people to discipleship – calling them to follow Him. (9:23) No matter how urgent the message or impactful the miracle, not many would follow Him. Most would reject Him, but still He went forward and proclaimed the good news.

John MacArthur writes “They would not accept Christ’s message because they would not acknowledge themselves to be wretched sinners on their way to eternal destruction.”

In a public setting a man stood up and asked Jesus a very direct question.

The lawyer’s request

The lawyer’s response

The lawyer’s rationalization

The lawyer’s reply

I. THE LAWYER’S REQUEST – v. 25-26

Our KJV Bible uses the term lawyer while the NIV identifies this unnamed man as someone who was an expert in the law. Let’s understand first of all that the term lawyer as it is used here is not the same as a lawyer we might think of who argues a case in court. He is not someone with an expertise in civil or criminal law. This man was a scholar. His expertise was the Old Testament law. In other places they are called scribes. Their business was threefold: (1) to study and interpret the law; (2) to instruct the Hebrew youth in the law; (3) to decide questions of the law.

We are not told if this man had been acquainted with Jesus or had ever heard Jesus teach on previous occasions. We are only told that he came to Jesus with a question. Whether he had actually heard Jesus or only heard about Jesus and His teachings led the man to come and ask a question. Because of the nature of the question and the occupation of the man, Jesus was the logical person to ask. But notice the motivation behind the question. Verse 25 states that he asked the question to *test* Jesus. Your Bible might have the word *tempt*. It's a word that means to test thoroughly or prove by testing. In school we take a test on a particular subject to see how much we know. The word is also used of someone testing the strength of metal. It can also mean to bait or lure.

The same word is used in II Corinthians 11:3-4 when it speaks about Satan beguiling or tempting Eve in the Garden to eat of the forbidden fruit.

There are some scholars who believe this is a legitimate question on the part of the lawyer, that it was a valid question born out of a sincere motive, something he really wanted to know. Others believe as I do that he was attempting to catch Jesus in teaching something contrary to the law. He had an ulterior motive. The religious leaders often attempted to catch Jesus in a verbal trap. In some way, any way, they hoped to discredit Jesus as a legitimate teacher.

There are two thoughts here about his question. He asked Jesus the question either to take issue with something Jesus may have said earlier or to find out what kind of teacher He really was. In essence he was wondering if he and Jesus agreed on a very fundamental question, a question that had to do with how a person gains eternal life. As a matter of fact, this question is the most important question that could be asked – by any one. What did the lawyer ask? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

There is no greater question that can be asked. How

do I get to heaven? That is a question the lawyer as a person trained in the Old Testament law and its interpretation should have known.

From the perspective of the lawyer who knew the law his emphasis was on the doing, and it had to do with what he had to do to get eternal life. He was asking Jesus what He saw as the essential requirements of the law that would ensure eternal life for him. How the question is phrased shows a wrong idea on how to be saved. There isn't anything I can do. Not a thing – except believe. The guard in Philippi asked Paul the same question “What must I do to be saved?” Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:30)

The question asked by the lawyer was rooted in the reality that man is immortal, a question that stemmed from the Jewish belief on immortality. They recognized God's promise of an eternal kingdom and if God promised such a place how do you make sure you are a recipient of that promise? As a lawyer steeped in Old Testament law he knew Adam's sin forfeited that promise and he wanted to know how to restore it. What would Jesus say?

There are those today who believe the philosophy that we should “eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow you die and there isn't anything after that.” Atheism may deny immortality, but they cannot escape the inevitability of man's mortality and so hope they are right. That's what Richard Dawkins hopes for. He doesn't believe in an afterlife or immortality. He's banking on nothing beyond the grave other than that his brain will rot. Steven Hawking doesn't believe in life after death either. Essentially what is made up of matter doesn't really matter in the end.

Yet in spite of the views of some, every world religion has the hope of eternal existence that is built on the premise of immortality, that man will live in some physical or conscious state forever.

Even those who believe in reincarnation believe in the endless cycle of life as the person returns post mortem to some other existence – a tree, a bird, another person. But every world religion believing in eternal life is built on the premise of works – what must I do. The exception is Christian, although there are groups within Christianity who believe that you must also do something in addition to believing in Christ that brings salvation. That's what Paul fought against in some of the churches he wrote to. Many want to know what they must do. What must I do? What must I do? What must I do? Whether a legitimate motivation or not, the man wanted Jesus to give him an answer based on something from the Law. Works had to be included.

This is a question that was asked of Jesus on other occasions and with mixed response. A rich, young ruler came and asked Jesus but he went away saddened and unmoved.

A Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, fearful of what the other religious leaders would think of him for talking with Jesus. What Jesus told him was the most fundamental and foundational truth regarding eternal life. God loved the world so much that He sent His one and only Son into the world that those who believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

In the passage before us today, Jesus does not give a direct answer, but throws the question back in the lap of the lawyer. "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"

"You are one who is supposed to know the law, what does it say? How do you understand it? How do you interpret it?"

Those of you familiar with Evangelism Explosion developed by Dr. James Kennedy will know the first two diagnostic questions. Those two questions reveal what the person is trusting in regarding eternal life.

1. Have you reached the point in your spiritual life where you know for certain that if you were to die tonight you would go to heaven?
2. If you were to die tonight and God were to ask you, "Why should I let you into heaven," how would you answer?

In a sense, that's what Jesus was asking the lawyer. What are you trusting in for eternal life?

Let me interject a question for us to ponder. If someone asked us that most basic question – How can I have eternal life – would we know how to answer the person? Regardless of the motivation behind the question could we tell someone how to be saved? We ought to know.

The lawyer had a request – what must I do to inherit eternal life? Notice now his response when asked by Jesus to answer his own question.

II. THE LAWYER'S RESPONSE – v. 27-28

His response was taken from two Old Testament passages found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. "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, 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The man's answer showed that he was well acquainted with the law. He knew it by heart. He had studied it inside and out. In short he said that total devotion to God and man was required. Not for one second could you love God less than with a whole heart. If you did, you couldn't have eternal life. That's what he was saying. Keeping the law was what merited eternal life.

Many are going to be surprised when they stand before the Lord to find out they are not granted eternal life in heaven. They are going to argue that they did things in the name of the Lord. Look at everything we did in Your name. Salvation isn't

based on activity. Believing in the finished work of Christ on the cross who took our place and paid our debt for sin.

The answer the lawyer gave presented a gospel of good works. Like so many today, he thought eternal life came from something you had to do, love God with your whole being. Isn't it interesting that what he offered as an answer was something that is impossible to do? Who is there among us that has ever loved God and his neighbor with his whole heart, soul, mind and strength all day, every day for his entire life?

The answer is that no one has.

Jesus sent the man back to the Law not because the answer to the question of how we can inherit eternal life is found in the law, that keeping the law saves us. Jesus sent the man back to the law to show him that the law can't save anyone, it only shows us that we need to be saved. No one can be saved by keeping the Law because no one can be saved by the Law.

Galatians 2:16, 21; 3:10, 21

So what is the purpose of the law, if the law cannot save?

Galatians 3:24

Romans 3:20

Even if it were somehow possible for someone to keep the law perfectly, that person would still not be saved, because this verse tells us that the person is not made right with God by keeping the law. A person can only be made right with God through the shed blood of Christ.

Romans 3:21-25

Romans 6:23

Romans 8:3

The law is God's standard and we have all fallen short of it, even the lawyer and he knew it. If we have all fallen short of it what then can be done, is there any hope?

Here is this man learned in the law.

He approached Jesus with a question - "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus turned it around and asked the man to answer his own question with his understanding of the law. Love God wholeheartedly.

Henry Ironside writes "It was a sad commentary on the state of his soul that he could recite these words so glibly and yet evince no sense of his own lost condition."

Jesus said he had answered correctly and if he were able to keep the whole law and be perfect, he would live. But Jesus' point goes deeper as we have seen that no one can keep the law and so if the lawyer had truly been introspective and honest, after a thorough self-examination he would have responded to Jesus the same way the repentant sinner had by calling on the Lord to be merciful to him. If he had done a true self-examination of his heart he would have concluded that he was guilty by the standard of the law, that no one can keep it 100%. He would have then asked Jesus for help. Instead, we see the lawyer's rationalization.

III. THE LAWYER'S RATIONALIZATION – v. 29- 36

The lawyer knew that he had been caught in his own trap and so he wanted to wiggle out of it. Our text tells us that he wanted to justify himself. In essence he wanted to make himself look good. He wanted to vindicate himself. He wanted to free himself from blame or implication. He knew the answer to the first question so he asked a question of interpretation.

"Who is my neighbor?"

In the back of his mind a neighbor was someone who lived in the same proximity as you or who had a similar background. They're next door or across the street or down the road. A neighbor to him was a fellow Jew and no one else.

We sometimes have the same mentality. It's someone we like or someone who will treat us kindly or someone who helps us if we help them. Some Christians think that their neighbor is only a fellow Christian. Anyone who isn't a Christian isn't my neighbor. That's what the Jews thought. A neighbor was a fellow Jew. Any other nationality was not a neighbor.

To answer his question Jesus responded with a story. It is one of the most familiar stories in Luke. We are all acquainted with the story of the Good Samaritan.

If the man really knew the Old Testament, he would have known that the law called for good will to be shown to an enemy. According to Exodus 23:4-5 the law says that if you happened to be walking down a country road or out in your own fields and found an animal that belonged to your enemy, you were to capture the animal and take him back to where it belonged. It didn't say you were free to have lamb chops for dinner or call your neighbors and host a barbecue at the expense of your enemy. The animal was supposed to be returned.

Jesus then tells a story and through it defines for the inquiring lawyer who his neighbor was. I think the lawyer knew the right answer but was totally unprepared for the answer he received. It's a story of compassion and what it looks like in real life.

A man was walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Walking down doesn't mean he was walking south from Jerusalem because Jericho actually lies 17 miles west and a little north of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was some 3500 feet above sea level and so it meant that in whatever way you were traveling you were descending to a lower level. This particular route was very dangerous. The road was rugged. In places it was a steep, winding road. It was a place where robbers hid and waylaid travelers.

On a particular day a traveler having left Jerusalem headed toward Jericho and fell among robbers. Our text tells us what the robbers did to him. They stripped him of his clothes. They beat him up so that he was half dead. They robbed him. They left him to die. It is a very grim picture that seemed hopeless for the traveler.

Sometime later hope was rekindled for the victim who lay naked and in desperate need of medical attention. Perhaps it was the footfall of sandals along the road or the gravel crunching beneath the weight of this new traveler. Maybe he heard the man humming a tune from the Temple. Jesus identified this person as a priest. He would be like a preacher. He was someone who should be the epitome of compassion, someone who should be concerned about the well-being and care of another person in need. He was someone expected to love others. He was after all a servant of God and expected to exemplify spiritual virtue. He was one who should have known the law and given aid.

Jesus said the priest saw the man and went to the far side of the road but kept going. He didn't even stop. Maybe he thought of the old adage "out of sight, out of mind." "If I pretend I don't see him I'll not be responsible for him."

James says that to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin. (James 4:17)

Hope was again fading for the victim.

Sometime later another man approached. Jesus described him as a Levite. They assisted the priest in the Temple duties. He was someone else who should have known the right thing to do. This guy did something the first guy did not. He at least went over and looked at the man in the ditch, but then he too, kept going. He was maybe humming the tune

“These boots are made for walking and that’s just what they’ll do.”

We can only speculate about a few things. Were both hurrying on their way home after completing their prescribed time and duties at the Temple? Were they on their way to the Temple and therefore did not want to defile themselves ceremonially by touching the man if he was dead? If that were the case they wouldn’t have been able to serve God in the Temple. Maybe they thought if they stopped, they might get robbed as well. Maybe they just didn’t care.

Sometime later, a third traveler approached. He is identified as a Samaritan. He was considered an enemy to the Jew. They had a mutual hatred for each other, but notice the twist in the story Jesus told. He stopped and showed compassion. He bandaged his wounds. Because the man was naked, the Samaritan either had some cloth from which he made bandages or he took some of his own clothes and ripped them up to make bandages. As the man was naked, the Samaritan would have taken some of his own clothes to clothe him. Then the man poured wine and oil on the wounds. The wine would serve as an antiseptic to cleanse the wounds and the oil would serve as a balm to soothe. Then he put him on his donkey and walked the man to the nearest inn. Inns did not have good reputations, but the Samaritan had no choice. He cared for the man overnight and then gave enough money to the inn keeper to care for the man. Depending on the inn it was enough money for anywhere from a couple weeks to a couple months. Finally, we see that the Samaritan vowed to cover any additional cost incurred when he returned.

Jesus concluded by asking the man to identify who the real neighbor was. That brings us to our final point, the lawyer’s reply.

It’s pretty obvious who the real hero is in the story Jesus told and even the Lawyer got it right. “The one who had mercy on him.”

Anyone should be discerning enough to get it. The problem with the lawyer is that he knew it in his head but not in his heart. If we have the heart of a neighbor, we will see and help the “neighbor” who is in need. And perhaps what greater need is there in the New Year than to see their obvious need of salvation.

The ultimate neighbor was Jesus who saw our great need when we were dead in our sin. He had compassion on us when we considered Him an enemy. He met our eternal need so that we can know for certain how we can inherit eternal life. The truth in his answer is sad because he refused to apply it to himself. Notice that he was unwilling to admit that aid came from a Samaritan. He wouldn’t acknowledge his own need nor would he claim to admit that eternal life came through the One he was talking to.

Jesus had compassion on us and took care of the whole bill for our payment of sin. His compassion was based on our need, not on our worth. His compassion for us moved Him to do something. He didn’t just call for someone else to do something. His compassion saw that there was no other way but for Him to act. Will our compassion for the lost move us to do something? His compassion cost something. His compassion was sacrificial.

Returning to the words of Henry Ironside he wrote “We can only be saved by what Christ has done. It is when we realize that we are helpless, like the man dying on the Jericho road, that we are ready to submit to the gospel and receive the salvation the Lord Jesus came to make possible.”

This is a passage about a man trying to maintain his own righteousness and didn't recognize his own lost condition. The man asked a question about eternal life. The question is not if you will live forever. The real question is where will you live forever? He asked the right question, but from what we understand He walked away with the wrong response.

My prayer for this New Year is that we will look at the destitute, hopeless condition of our "neighbors" and have compassion enough to meet them with their need – salvation through Christ. If though, your heart is like that of the lawyer, today is a good day to acknowledge your need of a Savior. He's the one whose birth we just celebrated. He's the only right answer to the question how can I have eternal life? As we take communion, now is a good time to respond in faith.