

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Trinity 13 – September 3, 2023**  
**Luke 10:23-37 – The Good Samaritan**  
**Pastor Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Wrong question, lawyer. Did you even think that through? You should know better. As a lawyer, you should know how inheritance works. Inheritance is not earned by doing anything. Inheritance is based on lineage. Either you were born into wealth and you inherit wealth, or you were born into poverty and you get nothing. Big inheritances go to undeserving children all the time. And even if you try to get a good inheritance by doing things that please your parents, even then the inheritance you hope for is still a gift. It still depends on their generosity, not your efforts. Abraham received the promised inheritance by faith, not by the law.

So, lawyer, if you think you can do something to inherit eternal life, guess again. There is only one way to inherit eternal life: be born into a family that possesses eternal life. Be born as the child of someone who lives eternally. Be born into the family of God, as a son of God. Only then can you receive the free, undeserved gift of the inheritance of God's eternal life.

A better question than, “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” would be, “How can I become a child of God, to inherit eternal life?” A question like that leads to the gospel. It leads to baptism. Like when Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, and Jesus taught him about baptism. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” You must be born again to inherit eternal life.

You were born again as an heir of God through baptism, to inherit his life. Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the word of God in and with the water. It's a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, as Saint Paul says in Titus chapter 3: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying.”

Baptism involves the whole Trinity. It makes us sons and heirs of God our Father, and fellow heirs with God's Son, by the Holy Spirit. Romans 8 says so. “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”

The whole Trinity is at work. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are working in concert to make you sons of God through baptism. You have received adoption as sons through baptism. By the Spirit you now cry to the Father, and the Spirit bears witness that you are fellow heirs with Christ.

Only through baptism you have the right to become children of God. Only through baptism you are reborn not of blood nor of the will of man, but born of God. Only through baptism, God's free gift, received by faith. Righteousness is not by the law. God does it all.

But the lawyer who stood up to test Jesus asked the wrong question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And because he asked the wrong question, he got the wrong answer. Not baptism, not grace, not the gospel, but hard law. Jesus was going to let him figure it out for himself. He's a lawyer, he knows the law. So Jesus lets him answer according to the law. He says, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And the lawyer answers, “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 neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus says to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

But this law answer makes the lawyer squirm. Because he knows Jesus is right. He knows if he obeys the law perfectly, if he loves God perfectly, if he loves his neighbor perfectly, then he will live. And he thinks he's done a pretty good job. But perfectly? Proving to Jesus that he has loved God and his neighbor perfectly is going to be a hard sell.

But is perfection really needed? God is satisfied when we make a good effort, right? Do your best and God will do the rest, right? Wrong. Very wrong. That's the way the world works, but not how God works. God demands everything. All your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. Nothing less than perfection is required for eternal life.

And the lawyer knows it. So he squirms. But as a lawyer, he's good at handling legal problems. Find a

loophole in the law. Show that the law is unclear, ambiguous. Show that you have kept the letter of the law, according to the technical literal interpretation. And the loophole that he finds here is that the law does not define the term neighbor. So desiring to justify himself, the lawyer answers Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Gotcha, Jesus. Ball’s back in your court.

But Jesus is the author of the law. He knows the spirit and the letter of the law, both. So in his wisdom and patience, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. But on the way he was beaten by robbers and left half dead. The priest offered no help, nor the pious Levite. They who knew the law did not consider this stranger their neighbor. They made no effort to show mercy. But then comes the Samaritan. Scorned and despised by all pious Jews, a foreigner who does not know the law and cannot trace his lineage to Abraham. But the Samaritan alone has compassion. “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

Now the lawyer is cornered. And he cannot bear to admit it. That a Samaritan is the hero – that’s so painful the lawyer cannot even bring himself to answer Jesus’ question directly. He can’t even say “the Samaritan.” He answers vaguely and evasively, “The one who showed him mercy.” But the point has gotten through. Jesus has gone behind the strict letter of the law to reveal the spirit of the law. He has uncovered the law of love behind all God’s commandments. And he has decisively shown that the lawyer has no excuse. Everyone is his neighbor. So Jesus delivers the punch line, “You go, and do likewise.”

You see that the lawyer’s question was wrong, and it got him the wrong answer, the law answer. You cannot obtain eternal life by doing anything. God may let you try, try to love your neighbor, but he will not accept your best efforts. Perfection alone is required. You must do the law perfectly, love your neighbor perfectly, love God perfectly. And you cannot. The task is more impossible than you know. If you go down that road, the road of trusting in the law, Satan is lurking there. He will rob you of all your pathetic efforts, he will leave you stripped and wounded, beaten and dying in your sin.

But there is another way. One man has already found you dead in your futile efforts, wounded and stripped by Satan and bleeding out. The real Good Samaritan – he was truly despised and scorned, stripped and wounded and left for dead in your place. Your true Good Samaritan has already had compassion on you. He has bound up your wounds of failure with oil and wine. He has anointed you in baptism. He has given you the wine of the cup of salvation in the Lord’s Supper. He has carried you on his own shoulders like a lost sheep. He has brought you to the inn, the church. And here he has charged the innkeeper, the pastor, to take care of you until he returns. Till then, he has given to the church two denarii, two sacraments, means of grace to take care of you. And whatever else you need, the Good Samaritan will also provide, out of his great mercy. And when he returns, he will raise you up again to health and salvation. This is the way of the gospel, this is how you have become a child of God and inherited eternal life. God has already done it all, just receive it.

And now, in your daily life, Christians are also called to imitate the Good Samaritan. Imitate Jesus. Not to inherit eternal life, but out of thanksgiving for what he has done for you. Love your neighbor as he loved you and gave himself for you. Love all mankind as he loved the world. Show mercy to the poor. Have compassion. Give generously of your time and money. For every person you meet is your neighbor. And do it all with a cheerful heart, knowing that as a baptized child of God, the kingdom is yours already. You already have the guaranteed inheritance of eternal life, the free gift of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.