

When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Hebrews on Mount Sinai, and later added more specific instructions about how to live together, humanity received a great gift – the Law – a set of boundaries to keep us away from sin and a guide to show the way to life. The Hebrews treasured the Law; that’s why Psalms proclaim, “the Law of the Lord is perfect,” and why they tried to understand what it meant to observe its boundaries and follow its guidance in every situation.

But just what the Law said, just what it meant, often wasn’t clear, especially, if following the letter of it was difficult, or seemed contrary to self-interest. Take the simple statement, “Do not lie!” for example. What if telling the truth will result in harm to me, or make things hard for my child, or hurt someone else; isn’t a little lie OK then? And, what if the one I’m speaking to isn’t a person but something big and impersonal – a big corporation protected by copyright laws; can’t I make just a *few* copies, for my personal use? Or the IRS; do I really have to declare *all* my cash income?

So, while one response to the gift of the Law was to try really hard to apply it everywhere, another was to try to narrow it down, to limit its scope, so that some of its most difficult implications could be avoided. Either way, trying rigorously, obsessively to obey it in every situation, or trying cunningly, craftily to limit its scope to make it easy to follow, the impulse was the same - the desire to be able to say, “I’ve done all I need to do; so I’ve earned God’s love and deserve God’s blessing.”

Some very important implications follow from being convinced we are, in fact, faithfully following the Law, and so doing all we need to do, and thus earning God’s love and deserving God’s blessing.

First, we’d want that to be all we needed to do. We’d want that to be enough. Following the law – whether rigorously and fully or craftily and narrowly – is all we should have to do.

Two others follow from that.

First, those who get in the way of our following the law, whose presence or influence might make harder to follow, become threats to be shunned and avoided. That’s just how the Jews came to regard those who didn’t fully keep the law, their cousins in faith, the Samaritans, and all Gentiles. So, sadly, the Jews separated themselves from the very people to whom God had called them to be a blessing.

Second, anyone who upsets our little arrangement with the law, who would dare to undermine our conviction that it’s enough, who would make life more challenging by telling us that there’s more we ought to do, would also be a threat, one to be dealt with just as harshly as any hated Samaritan.

Well, wouldn’t you know, Jesus got into trouble on both accounts. He dared to say the law wasn’t enough, and that God expected something more. And, he dared to say that that something more, had to do with those “sinners,” those impure ones, whose presence or influence might make our law-following hard, those who’d come to be seen as threats, as enemies.

While Jesus affirmed the law and saw it as a great blessing, he said that even the strictest observance of it wasn’t enough, because what God wants is our hearts. God wants a relationship with us, a relationship through which to share love – from God to us and from us back to God and others. God wants a relationship through which our hearts can become like God’s heart, full of love and grace, mercy and forgiveness. That’s how God hopes to bring blessing to the world through us!

When Jesus called disciples, he called them into that relationship. He called them to follow him down a road not knowing where they were going. He called them to travel by a very vulnerable grace, responding to the human, to the image of God, however hidden, in one another along the way.

And then, he didn’t just talk about it, he did it! He showed what that *more*, that vulnerable, gracious love looked like. He showed them in the way he treated those who had come to be seen as threats.

Of course, that's what really got him into trouble. It's bad enough for someone to say you ought to do more; it's even worse if someone actually does it. That's really a threat! Because if someone truly lives it, we're shown that it's possible and we lose our excuses for not doing more ourselves.

You know that feeling, that impulse! Why does he do so much? Who does she think she is? I can't stand it! Nobody can care so much, can have that much energy, and give so freely, from the heart! There must be some *other* reason! There must be something wrong with them!

That's why those who've lived the "more" God's looking for have always been attacked, why people have always tried to find ways to get rid of them, destroy them. That's why Jesus wept when he looked at Jerusalem and called it the city that kills God's prophets. That's why we follow our ancestors lead, no longer with stones and crosses, but with whatever means we can find to dismiss or destroy those who live God's "more." That's why Jesus must still weep when he looks at us!

All of this is at issue in this encounter between Jesus and the lawyer who tries to test him in today's scripture. The lawyer sees the Law as Gospel, ultimate truth, all he needs to live by. So, when he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" it's not that he wants to know, but that, believing he's got the law all figured out and knows all he needs to know, he just wants Jesus to confirm it.

So, he must've been pleased when Jesus responded with another question, one about just what he thinks he knows everything, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Likely believing his life is proof of the obedience of his faith, he quotes the law. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

His response pleased Jesus. To love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves is to have eternal life. So he says, "You've answered well; do this and you'll live."

But the lawyer can't leave well enough alone. For when Jesus tells him to love God with everything in him, and to love his neighbor as himself, he can obey only if he knows exactly what that means. Just who is, and who is not, my neighbor? How broadly must I share my love? How can I limit it?

There is, of course, a bit of the lawyer in us all. Of course, the lawyer's really a caricature of us all when we make the law into our gospel, and seek refuge in rules. Then we, too, look for definitions, for ways to set limits on our responsibility. Just what can I do and still remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? Just when must I not lie and with whom? Precisely whom am I to love as myself?

If I make the law my gospel, my ultimate truth, I'm the actor, and my actions ultimately must be justified by my understanding of and obedience to the law as I've humanly defined it. I'm in control!

Jesus saw that. He knew that to answer a question that seeks definition and limit, even with the most expansive and inclusive words, is to affirm that the law is the gospel, the ultimate truth. It would've been to allow his questioner the continued illusion of control. It would've been to reinforce the assumption that the life of discipleship is a life lived to *show* that you choose good rather than evil, rather that a life where what matters most is knowing and loving, trusting and serving God.

The story Jesus tells the lawyer is a story that casts us not as actors but as those acted upon by a love whose limitless goodness we can't fathom. It is also a story that spells the end of the world ordered by our narrow definitions of "neighbor," neighbor defined by the *law* as gospel. The story Jesus tells is the story of the *gospel*, the good news of God's love, as law.

So, let Jesus tell us that story again, as if for the first time. Let's go down that dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. In what ways have we believed that doing things right, following the rules is what life's about? In what ways have we believed that limiting them so they don't crimp our style

too much, so we can go after what *really* matters, is what life's all about? Either way, we've tried to keep ourselves, our actions, our interpretations, in control.

But on this road, in this realm beyond the law's reach, we find ourselves beaten and stripped of control, left helpless, half dead by the side of the road. The keepers of the law, the law by which we've tried to justify and secure ourselves – knowledge, legalism, popularity, success, power, – simply pass us by; they don't care a thing about us. Somehow their definition of the good does not compel them to love us as they love themselves. In fact, we learn, they're all about themselves.

But another character, traveling the same road we were traveling, an unlikely character for whom the *gospel* apparently is law—comes near, sees, and is moved with pity. Our need has called forth the obedience of love, the love which saves the world, and enables us to be fully human. And this is not just anyone who comes near, sees, and is moved with pity.

Who is it? Who is this person?

Well, it's anyone that we'd rather die than acknowledge that, “She offered help” or “He showed compassion?” That's our modern, personal equivalent of the Samaritan.

Jesus got more specific than the lawyer expected when he asked his question of Jesus, when after he finished his story he asked, “Who's the one who proved to be a neighbor? Who's the one who loved God with heart and soul, strength and mind, and his neighbor as himself?”

We need to get specific, too. For a Protestant in Northern Ireland, it's a Catholic; for a Catholic, a Protestant. For an Israeli, it's a member of Hamas; for a member of Hamas, an Israeli. For a neo-Nazi skin-head, it's a Jew; for a Jew, a neo-Nazi skinhead. For a homophobic member of the religious right, it's someone who's gay; for a gay person, it's a homophobic member of the religious right. For an American after 9/11, it's an Al Queda member; for a militant Islamist, an American. For all of us, it's someone we can't stand to be around, who threatens or angers us, someone we can never affirm or compliment, someone we look down on rather than look at, someone we wouldn't want to share a meal with or invite into our home, someone who we find fault with, slander, and gossip about.

This familiar parable is about much more than encouraging us to help a traveler whose car's broken down. It's a story that flies in the face of trusting the law as gospel. It challenges us to get beyond trusting anything we think we can fully understand, manage, follow, or control, as the way to life.

When the lawyer at the end of the story realized that he, and not Jesus, is the one being put to the test, he manages to say that the one who was the neighbor was the one who showed mercy. He can't bring himself to say the word “Samaritan.” Hopefully, that's a start. Sometimes that nameless admission, that someone we can't stand has done God's *more* is the best we can do, this side of the grave.

Loving God,

You are the judge and you are the source of justice.

You are the plumb line against which we are measured.

Yours are the standards by which we determine good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust.

When others try to mask the idolatries of racism, nationalism, and materialism as virtues;

...when oppression, and hate are preached in your name,

...we give you thanks that you have given us your written word in scripture,

...your spoken word through your prophets,

...and the living word of your Spirit written directly on our hearts to guide and guard us from error.

We pray for those who seek justice, whose cause is unheard, whose names are unknown,

...whose wrongs are not addressed,

...that your justice may be done in all the earth.

We pray for those content with limited justice, who are not moved by the suffering of the innocents,

...who do not see in the oppressed near and far another brother or sister,

...who prefer not knowing and not caring, who accept what they are told,

...that all may recognize you as judge and become inflamed with passion for your justice.

We pray for those who work tirelessly for your justice, unknown, unrenowned, or even reviled,

...unpaid or underpaid, relentless in their search for truth,

...unafraid to stand up to powers and principalities, upsetting conventions, unsettling complacency,

...unremitting in their commitment that your measure should be our measure,

...that your truth be made known and their work be rewarded with justice and peace.

We pray, also, for those who deliberately distort the truth, who knowingly pervert justice,

...who willingly oppress the innocent and act as if they'll never stand before your bar in your court,

...that their hearts may be changed and their lives transformed,

...that these, too, would come to a saving knowledge of your plan for the world.

We pray for ourselves, asking for your help to make your Gospel, the law of our lives,

...for your help in doing the *more* to which Jesus calls us, the *more* which he so faithfully lived,

...though it cost him rejection, slander, betrayal, suffering, and death.

Help us to receive, trust, live, and share, the love you give to us,

...and so be the blessings to others you intend us to be.

In the meantime, we ask that you continue to equip us for the tasks to which you have called us.

So, that one day, we may stand before you and hear you say, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

As those who seek to be your servants, we pray for those known to us with special needs.

We pray for...