

“Doing” versus “Being”

St. Luke tells us that a certain arrogant young lawyer, quite confident in his holiness and his standing before God, stood up to put Jesus to the test. *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Jesus doesn’t scold him for asking such a stupid question (and it is a stupid question). Why? Because heirs inherit. You don’t do anything to become an heir. ***You don’t make yourself an heir.*** You’re born an heir. An heir to eternal life? Either you’re born into eternal life, or you remain dead in your sins. But like I said, Jesus doesn’t even bother with the stupid question. He simply responds by leading the guy back to God’s Word. *“What does the Bible say?”* The young man’s response? *“That’s simple! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”* Jesus ***praises*** the response. The guy knows his Scripture. *“You’re right! Do this, and you will live.”*

But the young man isn’t content with the answer. You see, he knows how Jesus defines the term “neighbor.” He also knows how Jesus has a real problem with this guy’s ilk, and how they don’t show love to certain people. This is why he seeks to ***“justify himself”*** in front of the crowd. *“And just who is my neighbor? ‘Neighbor’ can’t mean EVERYONE! Surely, there are some limits!”*

And before we go any further, we need to be clear on what it means when it says he was seeking to “justify himself.” Was he trying to offer up ***excuses/explanations*** as to why he didn’t show love to certain people? Absolutely. He was absolutely trying to justify his selective love for some and disregard for others. Like I said, surely there are some limits/caveats! “Neighbor” can’t include EVERYONE!

But there’s more to this word! By trying to “justify himself,” he was, in a very real way, ***declaring himself righteous and holy in God’s sight.*** In spite of (or in full view of) his lack of love for certain folks, he was declaring his sinfully selective acts of love and hatred and disregard as righteous and holy, and therefore worthy of eternal life. Who was Jesus to say otherwise?! This guy was trying to force Jesus to admit in front of everyone that the “love” and “mercy” these guys were showing/living out in their daily lives was actually good and God-pleasing, and not everyone was ***worthy*** of receiving their “love” and “mercy.” ***Loving the neighbor doesn’t include EVERYONE!*** Basically, he wanted Jesus to admit that He was wrong and they were right. But Jesus doesn’t admit error or defeat, does He? Nor does He let loose with angry rebuke (even though the guy certainly had it coming). Instead, He teaches.

Now, I know we’re all familiar with this parable. This is one of those parables that EVERYONE knows! Religious or not, everyone around the world

knows what it means to be a “good Samaritan.” And yet... how many people—good Christians included—truly don’t understand what Jesus is teaching here?

Think about it. “*What must I do...?*” Many a Christian is smart enough to recognize the folly in the lawyer’s question about inheriting eternal life, but then turn around and ask the **same basic question, only with a little different wording**. “*What must I do to be saved?*” How many good Christians struggle with this question? Worse yet, how often is this parable treated as a type of prescription? “*Here’s what you need to do. Be like the good Samaritan.*” Okay... but what does that mean? More importantly, what does it not mean?

It’s ironic, but a **wrong** understanding of this parable is what leads good Christians down the same path as that young lawyer, **seeking their own justification**. Whether it’s individual Christians or congregations or denominations, Christians comfort themselves with the fact that, though they’re sinners, at least they aren’t like *those* people. Look at all the “selfless” good they do! (Funny how they make sure everyone knows how “selfless” it is, right? It it’s not on Facebook, did it really happen?) They don’t ignore those in need. They don’t cross the road to avoid interacting with people. Look at all the “tremendous sacrifice” they make for others... especially for those who don’t deserve it; e.g., food pantries, clothing closets, paying utility bills. They even go out of their way to do nice things for people they don’t like (and they’re sure to let everyone know about it too), and then turn around and pat themselves on the back for such “selfless charity.” “*You seeing this, God? You writing all this down?*” They inventory all their “good works,” and then dare to label themselves “good Samaritans,” never realizing that they’re really no different than the lawyer, **seeking comfort in their self-justifications**.

Are you saved by works? No! If salvation was attained by works, then Jesus Himself would be guilty of prescribing works-righteousness. “*See the good works the Samaritan did? You go and do likewise, and then you will inherit eternal life.*” But that’s not what Jesus said. Besides that, Scripture is clear that salvation is not attained by works. It’s not an earned wage. It’s a free and unmerited gift from God.

So... why did the Samaritan stop and show love? Why was he such a loving neighbor? It certainly wasn’t because the guy in the ditch deserved it. He didn’t. Truth be told, no one would’ve faulted the Samaritan for walking on by...or even kicking him or going through his pockets as he passed by. **But...that’s not who the Samaritan was.** It had nothing to do with the guy in the ditch and whether or not he was worthy of receiving mercy. The Samaritan did what he did; he showed love because that’s just who the Samaritan was. Jesus wasn’t commanding to merely do the good works the Samaritan did. He was commanding to ***be like the Samaritan. There’s a difference.***

And it's at this point that I hope you're beginning to see how the whole notion of "being born" and being an heir enters into this lesson. In terms of "being born," as children of Adam, we are by nature, at *enmity* with God. We are by nature, sinful and unclean enemies of God. We're not just born into a ditch, banged up and wounded in sin. ***We're conceived and born into a grave, dead in our sin!*** But this is precisely why Jesus, the truly Good Samaritan, came down from heaven...for you. Jesus, the truly Good Samaritan; i.e., the hated outsider, gave up all of heaven's majesty and glory to make Himself utterly hated and humiliated and despised by the children of Adam...for you. Why? He didn't do it because He *had* to. This [the crucifix] wasn't a chore Jesus had to do. This wasn't a box He had to check off if He wanted to be considered holy and righteous and loving. Nope. Jesus showed this love because ***that's just who He is.*** Jesus came to freely and fully pour out His gifts of sacrifice and life on you; on the corpse that is your sin, all out of an incomprehensible and unconditional love for you; all so that you could have life, and have it abundantly in Him. *"Charge all their sin, all their death, all their wages to Me. I will pay it all, in full."* And He did. It is finished, once and for all!

Now ask yourself: What have you done to deserve any of this [*the crucifix; Holy Communion*]? What have you done to deserve or earn this blood-bought gift of forgiveness for even one single sin, let alone an eternity's worth of them? What have you done to *inherit* eternal life? **NOTHING!** Jesus did it all! The reason for our justification is not our love or our good works, but Christ's love and righteousness; His holy, all-redeeming work. We're simply the recipients of this gracious gift. Purely out of divine grace and love, God chose you and called you. Eight billion people in the world, and He chose you from before the foundation of the world. Why? It's by this blessed baptism—by means of water and Word, which give new birth from above—that He has adopted you to be His own, ***making you what you are today: an heir of the heavenly King and His kingdom; an heir of salvation.***

Now... this free and unmerited gift of salvation should mean something to you. This is where the whole *"you go and do likewise"* rightly enters into the conversation, although, as I've already said, it will only be ***properly*** understood when it's understood within the context of the cross of Jesus Christ. Are there people who are difficult to love? Are there people who deserve to suffer, at least suffer the earthly consequences for their sinful behaviors? ***Absolutely!*** There's a lot of wickedness in our world right now (and in our own daily orbits), and I confess that there I times I find myself thinking that it'd be nice to see the "those people" get what they deserve. But then I remember (and confess): ***I deserve the same present and eternal punishment that all those folks do.*** Jesus died and rose for them... ***no different than He did for me.***

This is what John gets at in his first epistle. “*We love because He first loved us.*” This is **WHY** the good Samaritan did what he did, showing the mercy and love that he did. He knew who he was in relation to God. He knew **whose** he was. This [the crucifix] is **WHY** we love! This is **HOW** we love. In fact, we’re only able to show Christ-like love and selfless mercy to others **because Christ showed it to us first... in spite of us.** It should come as no surprise that one of Satan’s main goals is to destroy your ability/willingness to love and show mercy to people. Why? Because that’s what makes us most like Jesus. That’s why Satan attacks our willingness to forgive, our patience, our compassion and mercy and understanding. When you stop loving people, you stop reflecting the love of Christ.

Look to this cross. It’s in this cross of the truly Good Samaritan that we’re able to recognize ALL our neighbors... even the ones we can’t stand. Like it or not, they’re ALL people God the Father loved so much that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for. ***Do you know better than God?*** Like it or not, they’re ALL people that Christ died and rose again for. They’re ALL just like you, in need of the grace, compassion, mercy, love, forgiveness, and peace that can come ONLY from and through Christ Jesus.

This is why I’m going to end, not by prescribing what you now need to do, but by reminding you of who you are and **whose** you are: You are a baptized and beloved heir of everlasting salvation. Raised from death to life by Christ and in Christ, the beloved heir of Christ can’t help but respond in repentant thankfulness to such undeserved mercy and grace in like manner, loving has they’ve been loved. ***It’s just who they are... in Christ, their truly Good Samaritan.*** Compassion, mercy, grace, forgiveness, love: These are the good and God-pleasing fruits of repentance, borne not out of a hope/desire to be saved, but out of repentant joy and thanksgiving that they are saved. This was the Good Samaritan’s reality. ***Now, you go and do likewise. Be who you are... in Christ. Don’t simply “go and do” good deeds or churchly things. Be the Church! Be whose you are, and may the light and love of Christ show forth in all that you say and do.***

In His name and to His glory... AMEN.