

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Lutherans talk about the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. It was a major focus of Martin Luther, and C.F.W. Walther lectured on it, as I started last month to review in the Voice. Thus, looking at these texts, you may be thinking “that’s a lot of law.”

In fact, there are a lot of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” in our texts for today. Consider the Old Testament: *“You **shall not** do ... You **shall not** walk ... You **shall** follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them.... if a person does them, he **shall** live by them: ... you **shall not** reap your field right up to its edge, **neither shall** you gather the gleanings after your harvest ... you **shall not** strip your vineyard bare, **neither shall** you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You **shall** leave them for the poor and for the sojourner ... You **shall not** steal; you **shall not** deal falsely; you **shall not** lie to one another. You **shall not** swear by my name falsely, ... You **shall not** oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker **shall not** remain with you all night until the morning. You **shall not** curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you **shall fear your God: ... you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.**”* “Shall” is a law word. The Legal Information Institute defines “shall” thus: “Shall is an imperative command, usually indicating that certain actions are mandatory, and not permissive. This contrasts with the word ‘may,’ which is generally used to indicate a permissive provision, ordinarily implying some degree of discretion.”

It’s not surprising, then, that when a lawyer, an expert in the Law, stood up to question Jesus, he asked a Law question. Luke says he was putting Jesus *“to the test.”* Now we know Pharisees and Sadducees would later test Jesus with questions on His authority, on paying taxes, on the resurrection, all with the intent to *“catch him in something he said”* (Luke 20:20). This occasion, however, doesn’t seem like that to me. It seems to me that the question was genuine and well intended, though misplaced. This lawyer wanted *“to justify himself.”*

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” You hear the word “shall,” but there is no Divine “must” in this question, no δεῖ, “it is necessary,” in the text, but that’s surely how he meant it. And Jesus understood his Law focus. *“What is written in the Law?”* He asked him, to which the lawyer answered: *“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.”*

Jesus acknowledged the lawyer’s expertise. He knew the Law. *“You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”* That’s virtually a quote from Moses as we heard: *“if a person does them, he shall live by them.”*

The problem, which we Lutherans know so well, is that we are incapable of “doing this.” Not without fail, and breaking one commandment brings with it the condemnation of the whole law (James 2:10). As Luther said, “The law says ‘Do this,’ and it is never done” (*Luther’s Works*, 31:56). The Law cannot bring about our righteousness. We cannot meet God’s perfect standard. Therefore, St. Paul says, “*by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight*” (Rom. 3:20).

Which is not to imply that, as Lutherans, we discourage good works. We don’t. They’re encouraged. They’re called necessary. Our “*theologians ... not only require good works, but they also show how they can be done*” (Ap. IV:136). After receiving the Sacrament, we pray that God would give us strength in faith to love God and love our neighbor. But we Lutherans don’t look to our love for our salvation. We look to God’s love and to His favor. We look to God’s love enfleshed in His only Son, Jesus Christ, and to His grace in Jesus’ sacrifice on a cross. We look to God’s Son — “*in Him is life* (John 1:4) — and in Him by His grace we are made heirs of everlasting life (Titus 3:7). Again, Luther said, “Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done” (*LW*, 31:56)

Moreover, we receive this grace through faith, and then express it works of love to our neighbor. As St. John says, “*We love because He first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). This love bears witness to who we are as Christians. St. John says, “*[H]e who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen*” (1 John 4:20).

Thus, the lawyer’s next question to Jesus is helpful for us: “*And who is my neighbor?*” He wanted to justify himself, and that’s impossible, but Jesus’ answer to him is also an answer to us, not trying to justify ourselves, but wanting to respond to God’s grace by doing what God commands. That’s how Luther speaks in the close of the commandments, that “we should also love and trust in [God] and [so] gladly do what He commands” (Small Catechism). St. John says, “*For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments*” (1 John 5:3).

After telling His parable — and you know the details of that — Jesus asked the lawyer, who “*proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?*” That’s an interesting twist for us, for as Christians we often ask “Who is my neighbor — who is that other person — that I may love him?” But here, Jesus makes it personal, so that the question becomes, “How can I be a neighbor to the ones I encounter?” — as George would say, “to those nigh unto me” ... those near me who need help? Answer? Show them mercy. The lawyer apparently didn’t want to use the word “Samaritan” for they were despised by the Jews, but he knew it was the Samaritan who “*showed ... mercy*” that was the neighbor. And Jesus said to him and to us, “*You go, and do likewise.*” “Show mercy!”

Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus exhorted his hearers, "*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36). Here, He is calling for that same mercy from His followers, but why? Because we have received mercy!

Yes, we, who are Jesus' disciples, are called to show mercy to those around us, even at the risk of great personal sacrifice, because of the mercy we have received in Christ Jesus. Jesus Himself is the ultimate neighbor to us! Who is the one who would not pass us by but stopped and had compassion on us? Jesus! Who is the one, despised and rejected by man, who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows (Isa. 53:3-4)? Jesus! Who is the one who stooped down from heaven to tend us good-as-dead sinners and bind up our wounds (Isa. 61:1)? Jesus! Who is the one who gives His church the gifts of Word and Sacrament to care for us until he returns? Jesus! Jesus is our merciful Samaritan, who also shows us what it means to be a neighbor and calls us to this neighborliness — not to justify ourselves, but in thanksgiving for His great gifts of life and salvation.

O Lord, help us to heed Your Son's word and example and to trust in Him for our justification. Then, strengthen us by this Word and by the mercy we will receive in Your holy Supper, that we may abound in faith toward You and fervent love toward one another.

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