

***The Law as Demonstrated by 'The Good Samaritan'P***

Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity

(From the Epistle: *Galatians 3:16 ff.*, & Gospel: *St. Luke 10:23 ff.*)

*Gal. 3:16 (New King James Version) The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. 17 What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. 18 For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. 19 What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. 20 A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. 22 But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.*

*Luke 10:23 (NKJV) Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. 24 For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it." 25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" 27 He answered: " '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.' " 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

There always seems to be tremendous ongoing misunderstanding between God and man. It stems from the fact that although we have the privilege and honor of being made in God's image, there yet remains an enormous gap between the Creator and the created.

Why does it exist? It is simply because God is who He is: *...the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy...* (Isaiah 57:15), to quote that famous "sentence" [an introductory verse of Scripture] used in the Book of Common Prayer "Morning Prayer". And we are... who we are: *... the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin* (see Galatians 3:22a above) . This essential gap is the source of that perpetual division.

Today's Epistle and Gospel (BCP pp. 207-209), along with other recent readings and others to follow, underscore this great gap by pointing out the purpose and function of God's Law,

given through Moses as recorded in the Pentateuch, and why the religious Jews of Christ's day were so utterly misguided regarding it.

The Gospel demonstrates this vividly. A lawyer, a presumed expert in the Mosaic Law, challenges Jesus to an argument about the interpretation of the law that mandates that one is to *love one's neighbor as oneself*. Like all of us, the lawyer wanted a formula for how to get along with the unpredictable, demanding, incomprehensible God. He thought he would find it by flawless observance of the Law. As with many others, he is content with a superficial relationship with God. The Law, he is sure, is as deep as things go with God.

His example reminds me of the "yes, dear..." mentality of many husbands. They are utterly flummoxed when, after they've diligently performed every chore diligently listed by a wife, they behold her standing there seemingly as frustrated and unfulfilled in the relationship as she was before she resorted to the list. It was only a desperate means of engaging her husband. She is looking for something deeper-- she longs for *fellowship*; for engagement and friendship, with her husband.

Now that, of course, describes a human situation. God doesn't give the Law out of a desperate need for man. He gives it because He is revealing His nature in ever greater detail to men in order to fulfill man's need for God. He gives it with the full knowledge that the obedience to the Law that He both demands and expects, man is utterly incapable of rendering. His obedience to it is at best piecemeal, tentative, superficial, incomplete, inconsistent, and even offered for the wrong motive: a desire to win approval, or even to earn it as an expected wage for duties performed, rather than humbly offered in love and gratitude, with the full knowledge that the depth of the Law is limitless, and its implications for human behavior virtually endless: *Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law* (Psalm 119:18).

It is these frightening implications that Jesus attempts to point out in so many of His dealings with the religious Jews. God is holy, and for sinful man to even begin to pride himself in the smallest way in fulfilling the Law is at the least a great misunderstanding, and at the most an utter presumption.

How is this demonstrated in today's Gospel? The Samaritan's actions are offered as an example of an appropriate fulfillment of *loving one's neighbor as oneself*. What characterizes the Samaritan's love? His response to the situation is utterly improbable from the get-go. In showing the lawyer how far above even minimal expectations the Samaritan's good deeds have gone, Christ is presenting to him a picture of just what sort of standard the Law of God establishes.

-The Samaritan approaches an absolute stranger, a member of a race (the Jews) by which he is despised (see John 4:9b). He surrenders all fear of personal contamination and defilement by acting the part of paramedic, nurse, and ambulance driver.

-He suspends his own life and personal agenda without a second thought for the purpose of fulfilling what the case, in his view, requires.

-He risks his reputation with fellow Samaritans in rendering assistance to a wounded Jew. He overlooks any sense of racial vindication in transcending a generational hatred and following through with the dictates of compassion.

-He risks his own finances by not only committing himself to the injured man's immediate care, but also guaranteeing his resources toward his complete recovery.

Jesus uses this illustration to set a standard of performance for obedience to the two greatest commandments, and He does so by using the most unlikely of scenarios to see it acted out.

What are the implications for us? If helping a stranger in this manner is *loving one's neighbor*, what does this say about all our "neighbors" and the love we owe them? If the wounded Jew is the Samaritan's neighbor, what does this say about my wife? My family? Any and all of the people who make up the human context of my life, from the casual acquaintance to the most intimate?

The reaction of the *priest* and the *Levite* versus the Samaritan's establishes the two poles of possible response: complete indifference, and complete involvement. I find myself struggling to not opt for indifference, and the satisfying of my conscience by some token action of concern. The only way I can ever begin to get near this standard is by imitating the Samaritan, and turn myself into a completely different person... a servant, who sets himself aside reflexively, serving out of love, oblivious of reward, single-mindedly, without mean-spirited resentment and anger that I was ever dragged into the position of having to serve others in the first place! The only reward is the sheer pleasure of doing what's right. A peaceful night's sleep. Lovely memories. The smile on one's face at the thought that one has brought delight, or relief, of unexpected and undeserved blessing, to another. In doing so, we demonstrate our love to God.

Now we see why fulfilling the Law is a task immeasurably greater than we had ever imagined. Complete obedience rests utterly beyond us, but the Law cannot be altered to suit either our tastes nor our hapless state. Now we understand our need for Christ, who both died to forgive our failures to fulfill the Law, and also to place it literally *in our hearts* through the Holy Spirit, making our efforts at obedience a passionate expression of love to God and man, instead of an impossible duty and burden:

*But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:33; see also Galatians 5:16-18, 22-25).*

In Christ, the gap between God and man has effectively been closed.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*