

CHANGED BY LOVE, FOR LOVE
TRINITY 13 e LUKE 10:23-37

INI

I remember when I was in seminary,
I had a professor who gave us impossible multiple-choice quizzes -
The answers didn't make sense,
And it always seemed like there was more than one correct answer,
though there was a bit of truth in each.

So, when going over the answers to the quizzes in class,
The entire hour of that class was dedicated to debating the professor on why your
answer is technically right, even though that's not what he saw as the right answer.
We spent so much time debating the correct answer -
Part of it was for the sake of the grade, because every question seemed debatable in
one way or another.
But most of it was because of pride.
We didn't want to be wrong.
We wanted to justify what seemed like the right answer in our eyes,
even though it was wrong.

Justifying our thoughts and actions is like second nature to us.
Most often, we do it without realizing it.

The lawyer from the Gospel,
tried to justify his thoughts and actions about his neighbor,
Because he knew that eternal life was at stake.
He knew we are saved by God's grace,
But that God's grace changes His people to love their neighbor.

He's a lawyer in God's divine law, so he knew it well.
So when he asked 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?',
Being the expert he is, he tells Jesus 'Love God and love neighbor.'

Simple enough.
But the lawyer isn't satisfied with that answer.
He tries to wiggle out of an uncomfortable situation by asking "Who is my
neighbor?"

This question reveals the true nature of his heart.
Is his heart a heart of stone quick to judge and slow to love?
Or is his heart a heart of flesh changed by God's gift of forgiveness?

To understand why this is such a concern for the lawyer, let's explore his background.

He was a lawyer, an expert in God's law.
So, he and the Pharisees interpreted the Old Testament strictly.
That would lead them to exclude some outside of the definition of "neighbor".
They didn't need to show love to this group over here because they weren't "neighbors" according to their definitions.

As a result, the lawyer wouldn't see Gentiles as their neighbor,
Which is any non-Jewish person.
Particularly, Jewish leadership showed disdain towards the Romans,
Who were oppressive towards Jewish people and culture.
On top of that, they taxed the snot out of them.

But most applicable to Jesus parable, Jews didn't like Samaritans.
They wouldn't want to see Samaritans as their neighbor,
Because the Samaritans defiled God's Temple in Jerusalem by throwing dead bones into their courtyard and sanctuary.
And if you know about Levitical purity laws, that's a huge no-no.
It would be like if someone broke into the church and totally destroyed the inside,
Ripping apart our newly blessed paraments, breaking sacred vessels like the chalice and paten, or ripping our altar into wooden shreds.
It would make worship impossible. And it would break our hearts.
Not only that, but the Samaritans only accepted the first five books of the Bible and rejected the prophets and historical books as Scripture.
So, Jews felt that Samaritans threatened Jewish religion, which they did.
Anger, hate, and resentment resided in Jewish hearts towards Samaritans.

This lawyer wasn't sure if these reasons were justifiable to exclude Samaritans as neighbors.

To not show them divine love, despite their sin.
So, knowing possibly his salvation was at stake, the lawyer had to get his answer.
"Who is my neighbor? Does that include even Samaritans?"

In typical fashion, Jesus answers with a story.

We all know it - The Samaritan had compassion on the man half-dead.
He humbled Himself to serve and provide healing.
The priest and Levite were more concerned about Jewish purity laws -
to avoid touching what would have been a potentially dead body,
making them ritually unclean to sacrifice in the temple.
They were more concerned about this law over and against the law of love.

Knowing the history between Jewish leaders and Samaritans,
Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of the story.
Jesus made their enemy look more deserving of God's inheritance than the lawyer.

The lawyer was forced to admit that the Samaritan was the neighbor who acted out
of love and mercy.
The lawyer was led to realize that he's fallen short.
That divine love hasn't changed him to love, help, and heal his neighbor regardless
of race, religion, or agenda.
Why hasn't divine love changed him?
Because anger, hatred, grudges, and resentment reside in his heart -
and he's okay with that.
He himself has hardened his heart by his sin.
That's why divine love can't change him - because he won't allow it.

Being an election year,
Christians have fallen prey to the fear, anger, and hatred pumped into societies
psyche.
Whoever the candidate, the same tactics are used.
As a result, their fear, anger, and visible hatred manifests itself in conversations,
Facebook feeds, and newspaper opinion columns.
Thus, resentment, anger, and hatred find a home in stone-cold hearts.

Eventually, we may find ourselves like the lawyer.
We know we should love God and love neighbor.
And we got the love God part down, but who is our neighbor?
And if we don't love our neighbor, and ill feelings bubble up when talking about a
group of people we don't really like,
Then do we really love God?
Because if we did, we'd listen to him.
He says,
"Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" - Matthew 5:22

“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.” - 1 John 3:15.

“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge: I will repay,’ says the Lord.” - Romans 12:19.

All too often, people justify their unloving actions towards their neighbor and wear a badge of righteousness in doing so.

The true nature of the heart becomes revealed in this way.

Let me ask the same question Jesus is inferring towards the lawyer:

Is your heart a heart of stone quick to judge and slow to love? Quick to speak and slow to listen?

Or is your heart a heart of flesh changed by God’s gift of forgiveness?

We are dead in our trespasses and sins,

Particularly our sins of anger and hatred which harden our hearts to divine love.

We don’t love our neighbor whom God places before us.

We don’t love as God loved us.

God loved us in that while we were still sinners,

He sent His Son to die to forgive our sins.

Even while sinners made themselves at odds with God,

He revealed the true nature of His heart through His Son.

That’s unconditional love.

God’s love is best expressed in the parable.

Jesus is the Good Samaritan. You are dead on the side of the road.

Despite the fact that Samaritans hated Jews,

The Samaritan bent low to help a human being left for dead.

He set aside worldly differences to serve, love, and heal - which are eternal, divine actions.

He poured oil and wine to disinfect and seal the wound from infection,

He brought him to the nearest inn and pays for His stay while He heals.

This is what our Lord Jesus Christ does to you.

He found you dead in your anger, hatred, and all your other trespasses and sins.

Even though you’re dead in your sin and your heart is hardened to love,

He gives mercy to the merciless.

He gives life to the lifeless.

He gives love to the unloveable.

He's done this on the cross when He joined you in that metaphorical ditch and died with your trespasses and sins draped all over himself.

Then Christ rose from the grave, winning the victory over death and gives this resurrection and healing to you.

And that's what saves you.

He scoops you into His arms,

pours wine upon your wounds to disinfect you of your sin here at this altar.

He pours oil upon your wounds to seal you with His own love through His forgiving word spoken and preached.

This is eternal life.

So, what do YOU have to do to inherit eternal life?

Nothing. You're on the roadside dead in the ditch.

It's Jesus who comes to scoop you up and to give you healing from your sin.

Once Jesus has done His work resurrecting you,

He tells you what he told the lawyer - "Go and do likewise."

Jesus has justified you from your sins because you can't justify yourself.

And He changes you by His love, for love.

Enlightened by the Gospel and sanctified in His gifts,

You now love as Christ has loved you.

Christ loved you in that while you were still sinners, he died for you.

Now it becomes, you treat even your enemy with love and care,

Even if they seek to take your life.

That's the way of Jesus.

We are changed by love, for love.

Go and do likewise.

INI