

Luke 10:25-37
The Answer to an Important Question

It is important to ask good questions. “Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers” wrote Voltaire. In this passage we have perhaps the most important question any person could ever ask.

Context

Jesus is in the final months of His life. He is on His way to Jerusalem where He will be crucified. He has healed the sick, fed the hungry, and raised the dead. He has taught those who would listen and confounded the Pharisees who challenged Him. He has proclaimed the kingdom of God and asserted Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God incarnate. Still, of the thousands who had heard and seen Him, only several dozen had actually committed to following Him. Most had turned away.

Jesus had not only interacted with the crowds, He had personally interacted with people. He had spoken to individuals. He had met individual needs. In this public setting, Jesus again had a very public conversation. Those around could hear both the question and the answer. All who were interested could profit from the conversation. The man asked the right question to the very person who could provide the best answer, and though he heard the truth, he walked away, presumably into damnation.

The Question

The man was “a lawyer” (v. 25). That is, he was an expert in the Law who hired out his services to religious leaders. He knew the details of the rabbinical teachings. He understood the nuances of interpreting the centuries-old traditions. We have met his type before, usually in the context of trying to confound and discredit Jesus on some point of the Law.

“The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, ‘Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?’” (Luke 5:21).

“The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him” (Luke 6:7).

That the man “stood up” (v. 25) was a sign of respect, as was the fact that he addressed Jesus as “teacher” (v. 25). The phrase “put Him to the test” (v. 25) might imply that he was trying, again, to catch Jesus in some misstatement, as it is used in Mark 10:2, “some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife.” However, it could also be interpreted as simply one legal scholar putting forward a difficult question to another. Later on, though, we discover that he wished to “justify himself” (v. 29), and his motives become more clear. However innocently he may have appeared, his motives were not genuine.

The Implication

Implied in the scribe’s question was a belief in eternal life. Concepts such as pure materialism or annihilationism were not a part of Jewish theology. A belief in immortality was inherent in Jewish teaching. Throughout their history God had promised the Jews an eternal kingdom of blessing.

Job knew that “even after my skin is destroyed,
yet from my flesh I shall see God;” (Job 19:26).

David was glad that “in Your presence is fullness of joy;

in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” (Psalm 16:11).

After the death of his son David said, “but now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23).

Daniel prophesied, “the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come” (Daniel 7:18).

Jews believed that as descendants of Abraham, they were entitled to “the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises” (Romans 9:4). John the Baptist had challenged that teaching by arguing instead that they should “bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8). So the question remained.

If Jews were not entitled to eternal life by the fact of their descent from Abraham, what was the criteria by which they could merit salvation? The scribe does not want to miss out on eternity. He had kept the Law, thus demonstrating his fervent Judaism. The conversation was brought on because of the inherent problem in a religion where you have to earn your salvation. Can you ever do enough? Was keeping the Law sufficient?

Jesus was a good person to ask, because Jesus had spent much of His time speaking about eternity.

“²⁹Jesus said, ‘truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, ³⁰but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life’” (Mark 10:29-30).

“He who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together” (John 4:36).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

A Caution

As an aside, we live in an age where a belief in eternal life is no longer culturally universal. Various alternative beliefs have developed in recent times to challenge it. Yet throughout history various cultures have developed rituals and ceremonies that imply a belief in life after death. If Jesus preached the reality of life after death, should we not also do the same as we evangelize? Evangelism based on meeting people’s needs by presenting Jesus as a panacea may be effective in getting people interested, but it leads to a false expectation of what faith does.

Scripture does not offer us a guarantee that things will improve for us once we place our faith in Jesus. All too often, the opposite occurs. Seasoned believers know that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). It is a mark of our relationship in the family of God, “if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:17). In fact, trials ought to be something which we rejoice, and “¹²not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; ¹³but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep

on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. ¹⁴If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Faith in Christ is not something we do to make things better in this life, it is something we are given to make things better in the life to come.

The Answer

Jesus responded to the scribe saying “what is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” (v. 26). In this, Jesus is again affirming His desire to fulfill rather than abolish the Law. He did not let it rule over Him, “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:5), but He still obeyed. Jesus was making it clear that He was not teaching some new doctrine, but only instructing in the basic principles of the Law. Jesus had a high respect for Scripture. He did not ask “what do Jewish leaders say?” or “what do the traditions teach?” but simply “what is written in the Law?” When faced with a question, we would do well to ask the same.

By asking the scribe “how does it read to you?” Jesus could be stating “what does it mean?” or “how do you, as a scribe interpret it?” However, an equally good understanding would be “how do you recite it?” That is, Jesus is making reference to the *shema* of Israel found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “⁴Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

This scribe was well trained. He answered Jesus with the *shema*, quoting it is verse 27. Then for good measure, the scribe added the command of Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This was the exact same answer Jesus, Himself, had given when challenged by a scribe,

“²⁸One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’ ²⁹Jesus answered, ‘The foremost is, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; ³⁰and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” ³¹The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31).

These commands called for the highest form of love, *agapao*, which meant a total application of all of oneself to another. It could not be done in half-measures. It was all or nothing. It required the commitment of “all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (v. 27). Nothing was omitted. This included all of oneself as rational, feeling being. It was the ultimate example of discipleship, “if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23) and it carried with it the ultimate fulfillment, “for whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:24).

The answer was simple. To inherit eternal life, the scribe needed only to love his God and his fellow man perfectly at all times. Jesus affirmed his answer, “you have answered correctly; do this and you will live” (v. 28). The problem was that there was no possible way the scribe could do that. The scribe knew that “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Romans 3:20). It said so in the Law

itself, “cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Deuteronomy 27:26). The scribe knew that “the soul who sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4).

The answer to the question “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” was that it was impossible. “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “There is none righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). “The Scripture has shut up everyone under sin” (Galatians 3:22).

We must pause to reflect that there is nothing wrong with the standard God has set. The Law is perfect, “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). The problem is not with the requirement that perfect obedience is required for eternal life. The problem is that we are all sinful. The fault is ours, not God’s.

The Defense

Faced with this dilemma, the scribe could have cried out like the repentant tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” (Luke 18:13). Instead he offered us an example of how a great deal of knowledge can be had without being accompanied by saving faith. The scribe tried to reason his way out of the situation. Such thinking, trying to find a loophole or overlooked detail, was the essence of the job of the scribe. Any nuance that might be interpreted favorably was sought for. In this case, the scribe challenged Jesus, “and who is my neighbor?” (v. 29).

Jews had interpreted the command to love one’s neighbor in many different ways. Some had taught that it means to love those who loved you in return, “you have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” (Matthew 5:43). Others said it referred only to those who were worthy of love by their advancement in the knowledge and practice of the faith, “this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed” (John 7:49) the Pharisees said. The ascetic group of Essenes at Qumran taught that anyone who was not a member of their faith should be hated.

Instead of recognizing his need and seeking the Savior before him, the scribe instead tried to reason his way out of the problem. We cannot do that with sin. We cannot justify ourselves. We cannot explain away our depravity. We cannot make excuses that will ever be acceptable to a perfectly holy God. The scribe chose self-righteousness over the righteousness of God.

When we try to justify ourselves, we underestimate God’s righteousness. This is what the Jews had done. They had believed themselves capable of earning salvation by keeping the Law. And when they didn’t keep the Law, they thought their sacrifices in the temple would be their justification. But these were only temporary measures. The full and complete sacrifice for sin came with the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is what all the other sacrifices had pointed toward. That is what they had been meant to foreshadow. They were simply a means to an end, not the end itself.

The Illustration

The story is a familiar one. We learned it as children. Often the emphasis is on the wretched man suffering along the side of the road while people pass by until one good man comes along to render aid. We are taught to be like the good Samaritan. And so we should. But the deeper meaning of the story is in its relation to the questions being asked by the scribe. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25)

was answered by “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” (v. 27). The question “who is my neighbor?” (v. 29) is answered by the story.

The main character in the story was “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (v. 30). Jericho was only about fifteen miles from Jerusalem, but it was over 3,500 feet lower in elevation. The terrain was mountainous. Therefore the road down was steep in places and there were many ravines and rock formations that provided hiding for those wishing to ambush the unwary traveller. That was what happened to this man as he “fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead” (v. 30). They took his donkey (if he had one), his clothes, his money, and nearly his life.

The man was in a seemingly hopeless situation. He was injured, naked and without resources. Fortunately the road was well traveled, and whatever hope there was depended upon someone passing by to render assistance. At some point, we are not told how long the man lay there, “a priest was going down on that road” (v.31). The man’s hopes revived, and perhaps he even uttered a cry or reached out a bloodied arm to get attention. He was in luck. A priest was a servant of God. He had perhaps just finished ministering before the temple in Jerusalem. He would know the command to extend God’s kindness to strangers for it was written that “the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:34). This kindness extended even to helpless animals, “If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him” (Exodus 23:5). Surely he was more valuable than a donkey.

Apparently he was not, however, for when the priest “he saw him, he passed by on the other side” (v. 31). Some have excused the priest because he could not violate the Law by touching a corpse, and the man might very well have appeared to be dead or nearly so. This, however, does not excuse. Even if the man were dead, or died in the care of the priest, the priest was “going down on that road” (v. 31) and therefore was on his way back from Jerusalem. Having finished his priestly role at the temple, he had plenty of time to purify himself if needed.

More time passed. The man was parched. He wounds ached. The sun beat down. Finally he heard the approach of another traveler. This second man was “a Levite” (v. 32). This man assisted the priests and knew the Law well. Yet, like the priest, “when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side” (v. 32). The man grew desperate. Two men who should have helped, two men who had been circumcised, been taught the Law and been dedicated to its service, had ignored him. It would soon get dark, and he would be at the mercy of the cold, the dark, and wild animals. No doubt he began to despair. Again he heard footsteps. Another traveler was on the road. It was “a Samaritan, who was on a journey” (v. 33). The man must have felt his luck could not get any worse. This man was his enemy. He was of a hated race, a despised people. And the feeling was mutual. The enmity between Jews and Samaritans was centuries old and irreconcilable. Ironically, the wounded man probably hoped the Samaritan would not see him, for if he stopped he would only do him further harm.

Yet this man, “when he saw him, he felt compassion” (v.33). The Jew must have admitted surprise that a Samaritan could feel such things for a Jew. But more than just feeling compassion, the Samaritan acted upon it. He “came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him” (v. 34).

This was amazing. The Samaritan had to tear some of his own garments to make the bandages. The oil and wine would both disinfect and soothe the wounds. Then the man was lifted onto the donkey (probably) and taken to a local inn to be cared for and to rest. Can you imagine the sight of a Samaritan walking alongside his donkey steadying a wounded Jew? The man had to be astonished at the kindness he had received.

The Samaritan could have ended his responsibility there. After all, he had brought the man out of the road. He had saved his life. Yet, to ensure that the man was taken care of responsibly, the Samaritan “took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you’” (v. 35). This was no small sum. Two days wages would provide several days or even perhaps two weeks worth of room and board. This was generous. Yet the Samaritan was still not finished. He promised the innkeeper that on his return trip he would stop in and settle any outstanding debts accrued on behalf of the injured man. He was leaving a blank check. His generosity was unlimited.

Finishing His story, Jesus then asked the scribe, “which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” (v. 36). The answer was obvious, and the scribe gave it. “The one who showed mercy toward him” (v.37). Jesus concurred, “then Jesus said to him, ‘go and do the same’” (v. 37).

The point was clear. Everyone was a neighbor. The question became not “who is my neighbor?” but “am I being a good neighbor to all?” They only way to inherit eternal life was to live a life of perfect love toward God and everyone else. To be lavish in our generosity to all, even to those who are our enemies. Because of our sinful nature, this simply cannot be done. Therefore we are all under the curse of sin unless God, Himself, redeems them. That is the point Jesus was making. The kingdom of God had come. He was the Son of God and He offered salvation to all who would believe and follow Him.

Take Aways

May we recognize that eternal life is a free gift, given by God through the work of Christ, and live a life of obedient gratitude in return.