

“And who is my neighbor?” With these words, a certain lawyer tries to find a loophole in the Law of God, something that will let him go on sinning against those he doesn’t like. And while they come out of the mouth of this individual, these can be found in the hearts of many, including our own.

Deep divisions cut through the people in Jesus’ day, and deep divisions cut through us as well. The news, the polls, our own experience shows that we are living in a deeply divided society.

But that is not how God intended us to be. And that is not how it will remain. Rather, He gives to us the one thing that can heal our divisions and restore us to our neighbors: His love. The love of Christ overcomes the terrible divisions between those who God makes to be neighbors.

That God created us to be at peace with our fellow man is a truth of Scripture, one spoken by the lawyer in our reading. Answering Jesus’ request for a summary of the Law, the man responds, “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.”

Love the Lord; love your neighbor. That’s the Law. Jesus points out that this is absolutely correct. In fact, He will give the same answer to some Pharisees and scribes later on in Jerusalem.

This morning we’ll focus on just the second half of that summary, which is what the lawyer focuses on. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s right out of Leviticus 19. And what is God commanding His people in these few words? Love.

Not “don’t pick fights with your neighbor unless they start it,” or “only talk about your neighbor when they won’t hear you” or “it’s okay to speak poorly of your neighbor if what you’re saying is true.” Love is more than looking for the minimum requirements.

And love doesn’t only include not doing negative or bad things to your neighbor, but also doing good or positive things to or for them. Loving your neighbor means both wanting what’s best for them and doing it as you’re able. Loving means giving them the benefit of the doubt, letting them explain themselves and honestly trying to understand them. Loving your neighbor means caring for them and even sacrificing of yourself for their sake.

Remember too, this is loving as you love yourself. Not a close second, or with whatever you can spare at the end of the day once you’ve taken care of yourself. No, the Lord commands that you love them just as much as you love yourself. This is the truth behind the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

In all this, to love means to do all this for them regardless of whether you think they deserve it or not. Love, after all, isn’t something that’s earned, but something that is given. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is a weighty, severe command from the Lord. That’s why the lawyer goes looking for a loophole, something to possibly ease the burden. He can’t argue with the wording and try to twist or obscure things, as it’s short, sweet, and straight out of the Scriptures. And He can’t try to pick apart the

idea of love – at least intentionally – because God is love, and so to try to diminish love would be to try to diminish God.

So what does He go with? “And who is my neighbor?” Maybe the lawyer thinks that, if Jesus will narrow down the definition of neighbor, then it might reduce the burden of this commandment to something “manageable.” If his neighbors are only those who are like him, who share his views, who are kind to him, who he enjoys being around, then just maybe he could make it work.

This is all shattered by the parable Jesus tells to answer his question. A man, a Jew, is coming from Jerusalem to Jericho, and is robbed, beaten, and left half dead next to the road. Three different people happen across this man in his dire condition. Which one helps him? A Samaritan!

You can almost see the eyes raised and hear the gasps taken when Jesus says this. Why? Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Not just disliked. Hated. The Jews saw the Samaritans as impure, as they were descended from the peoples the Assyrians had brought in after they’d destroyed the Northern Kingdom. These foreigners had mixed with the very poorest of the Israelites the Assyrians had left in the land, and so the Jews saw them as half-breeds.

Over the years, the Samaritans had changed the Scriptures, keeping only the first five books of the Bible and altering them. For example, they made the Tenth Commandment into one demanding worship on their holy mountain, Mount Gerazim, and they said that Moses was the one who would return and deliver the people.

For the Jews, this was too much, and they were violently opposed to the Samaritans from the start, even destroying the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerazim during a brief period of independence between Greek and Roman rule. For their part, the Samaritans claimed that their altered Scripture was the true one and that they were right to throw out the prophets and bring in worship from their pagan ancestors.

They would attack the Jews, the Jews would attack them, and only the presence of the Roman legions seemed to keep an uneasy peace between the two. Hundreds of years of bad blood between the two groups had brought enormous, deep divisions between these two groups, despite the fact that they were both offspring of Abraham.

There could be no reconciliation, no love, just a desire that the other side be humiliated, crushed, or somehow taken away.

I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to see this sort of division in our own society. Whether you listen to the talking heads on the news, or read the articles and polls that pop up on your phone, or just listen to conversations in public places, our society is very much divided.

Republicans and Democrats seem to despise each other just as much as Jews and Samaritans. Certain groups have decided that every problem in the world is due to racism, dividing society by skin color. Critical theory has taken over much of our public discourse, portraying everyone in society as either an oppressor or a victim, regardless of any actual actions taken by the person.

Allegiances are declared by flags flown in front yards, endorsing everything from presidential candidates to foreign wars to transgenderism to abortion. The divisions are very much there.

And with the divisions, both between Jews and Samaritans and the divisions we have today, there are sometimes real grievances behind them. It was wrong that the Samaritans changed the Scriptures to fit their own ideas. Jesus isn't endorsing that by making the Samaritan the "good guy" in this parable.

And it is wrong today when people endorse lifestyles contrary to God's word, or exploit the poor in the name of free markets, or lead children to irreversibly harm themselves, or try to replace the family with the government, or assume that the color of one's skin imparts any sort of guilt or righteousness.

The point of this parable isn't that everything goes and there is no right or wrong and that all you need is a warped, mushy, feelings-based idea of love. The Jesus who told this parable is the Jesus who said that to love Him is to keep His Commandments, and who said that He will be the one who will send people into hell at the Last Day for rejecting Him and those He sent.

So we aren't required to endorse the ideas of those we disagree with, and in fact we must not if they are going against the word. But we are required to love those with whom we disagree. We are commanded to show them mercy, to treat them with compassion, to do to them as we would have them do to us – even if they aren't appreciative or reciprocate our love.

That's a tall order, loving one's enemies. In fact, it would be impossible for us, to truly love them. But we can, and the reason comes from a familiar verse. "We love, because He first loved us."

The love of God in Christ toward those who were His enemies is the central truth in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Yes, we are commanded to "go and do likewise," but we can't fulfill that command unless Christ first shows us love.

We, and all humanity, are born in sin and as enemies of God. Scripture is clear on this – see Romans 5, for example. And sin has consequences. We choose to rebel against God and ignore His word and do our own thing, and this brings about all sorts of harm: sadness, pain, suffering, and finally death. It's not robbers that we encounter; we can't say "the devil made me do it." By our own thoughts, words, and deeds, we are left half-dead, unable to make it down the road to the New Jerusalem.

But then along comes Christ. Here is the God whom we have ignored, rejected, and fought against. Here is the Lord who gave us the map to the city, which we tossed aside and went running off, to our own peril. Here is the one who has done nothing but good to us, and to whom we have shown so much evil. If anybody ever had cause to pass someone by due to what the other person had done to him, it was the Son of God.

But He didn't pass us by. No, He looked on us with compassion and love that only God has. He pulled us out of the ditch where our souls lay dying and gave us treatment only He could provide.

As with the Good Samaritan, Jesus bound up our wounds, but it cost Him greatly. As Isaiah prophesied, it was by His wounds that we are healed. He didn't pour on oil and wine, but water and His blood as He hung on the cross, paying the price for our divine restoration.

He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, as again Isaiah said, and then sends His Spirit to lift us up and carry us into the Church. Here, in the inn founded upon the prophets and apostles, Jesus provides what is needed for the care of our souls, His word and His Sacrament, which continue our healing and sustain our souls. In the inn of the Church, we then wait for His return, when He will gather us to Himself and restore us to the perfection which He has always intended for us.

Because of what our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan, has done for us, we are able to obey His command and go and do likewise. We can show mercy because He has shown us mercy.

We can go forth from this inn and seek out those laying in the ditches, suffering under the effects of their sins. We bring the healing medicine which Christ has given us to all we find, regardless of who they are, what political party they belong to, what flags are flying in their yard, which news channel they watch.

Some might refuse it, saying that the medicine of the Gospel stings or that they want to go to a different inn. And there, we can't help, because only Jesus and the gifts He gives can save those waylaid by sin and death.

Yet we cannot refuse to go out, thinking that we know someone will just refuse our help because of the divisions between us. We must not go only to those whom we think deserve it, or only those who fell into the same hole that we landed in. For if Christ had taken this approach, we would all be condemned to death.

So when our pride tempts us to this, we must look to the cross, to our innocent, loving Lord hanging there for us, and repent.

Our Lord has told us to make disciples of all nations, to call out in the highways and byways, to seek beyond those whom this world would say are our neighbors. In mercy, we share God's love and God's word with all people, so that by God's grace, our divisions might be healed, and that they might be our neighbors not just in this life, but our neighbors eternally in the Kingdom of God.

In His holy name, amen.