

Your Neighbor and Your Justification

Luke 10:25-37

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Justification is necessary in order to inherit eternal life. Even the lawyers know that.

Justification is the status of being right. If an action is justified, the action is right. If an action is not justified, the action is wrong. If a person is justified, he is right. If a person is not justified, he is wrong. In order to inherit eternal life a person must be justified before God. If a person is justified before God, he is right before God. If a person is not justified before God, he is not right before God. If a person is justified before God, he will inherit eternal life. If a person is not justified before God, he will not inherit eternal life and will face eternal damnation. It is therefore important to be justified before God.

How is a person justified before God? Well, that depends on whether or not you are going to do it yourself. If you are a person who seeks to justify yourself before God, you will have to keep the commandments in order to inherit eternal life.

If you are going to justify yourself, you will have to keep the following commandments: You will not murder. You will not commit adultery. You will not steal. You will not give false testimony against your neighbor. You will not covet your neighbor's house. Honor your father and your mother.

If you have kept all of these and you are still seeking to justify yourself, then there is the great commandment that you must also keep. You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind and with all your soul. There shall be no part of your heart that loves something other than God or what God has commanded you to love. There shall be no part of your strength that shall not be devoted to God or what God has commanded. There shall be no part of your mind that shall not meditate upon God and what He has commanded. There shall be no part of your soul that shall be for anything else other than the Lord your God.

This is another way of saying that you shall fear, love, and trust in God above all things. There shall be nothing or no one that you shall fear more than you fear God. He shall be the primary motive of your actions. There shall be nothing and no one that you shall love more than God. Your affections shall not be diverted to anything else. There shall be nothing and no one that you trust more than God. He shall be first in your prayers, first to turn to in time of need, first to consult when making major life decisions. Anything that you fear, love and trust more than you fear, love, and trust God, is an idol. Idols make you unjustified before God.

If you feel that you have kept this one and are still seeking to justify yourself, there is a commandment similar to the commandment to love God above all things. This commandment is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." This commandment is no less important to God than His command to love Him above all things. The Lord knows that we humans are given to abstractions. Since God is a spirit it is easy for me to fool myself into believing that I fear, love and trust in Him above all things. Since God is a spirit it is easy to believe that I love Him with body, mind, soul, and strength. All I have to do is tell myself that I am. There is no incarnate standard by which such love can be measured.

That being the case God gives you a commandment by which your love for Him can be measured. He tells you to love your neighbor as yourself. Since the commandment comes from God when you love your neighbor as yourself, you are really loving God. If you do not love your neighbor as yourself, you are not loving God. Remember the commandment to love your neighbor came from God.

How you treat your neighbor then becomes the objective standard by which it may be determined whether or not you love God.

It helps that your neighbor is not a spirit. He is not some abstraction. Your neighbor is a person with a history and with certain needs which you may fulfill according to your vocation toward your neighbor. Therefore loving your neighbor means that certain concrete actions are avoided lest you harm your neighbor. It also means that certain concrete actions are taken in order to show love for your neighbor. If such actions are not taken, then you do not love your neighbor as yourself and therefore do not love God with heart and soul and mind and strength. If you take action that harms your neighbor, you are not loving your neighbor as yourself and therefore not loving God with heart and soul and mind and strength.

If you are not loving God above all things, you are not justified. If you are loving God above all things, you are justified. Therefore if you are going to justify yourself, you will have to love your neighbor as yourself.

The legal mind is a human mind.

As soon as God lays down any commandment, the human mind is trying to get out of it. If God were to tell us to jump, we would ask him how high does the leap have to be before it is considered a jump? Do our feet have to leave the ground? If so, how high must they go?

We human beings want fair play. We do not want others to justify themselves when they do not deserve it. If we are trying to justify ourselves before God, we want to be sure that we get credit for the things that we do? So how high does the jump have to be? Who is my neighbor anyway that I may love him? We want to limit the commandment so that we may keep it.

Surely my neighbor is the person who lives next to me. Surely my neighbor is the person with whom I attend the Divine Service. Surely my neighbor is the person with whom I go to school. Surely my neighbor is the person with whom I work. Surely my neighbor is not my family. Surely my neighbor is not my enemy. This is who someone who wants to justify himself before God thinks. He wants to limit the commandment so that it may be kept and he may take credit not only for loving his neighbor as himself, but by doing so loving God with heart and soul and mind and strength.

And so our Lord tells His parable.

You know the parable of the Good Samaritan. I would hope that you know it well enough that I do not need to repeat it here. But one problem that the parable has is social justice in the United States. We tend to read everything through the light of social justice. We assume that our Lord is a social justice kind of a guy. We assume that our Lord is a western liberal. And because we assume that we jump on the fact that the person who shows mercy to the guy who fell among the robbers is a Samaritan. We know from Sunday School that the Samaritans and the Jews hated each other. We know that this Samaritan by race and birth would have hated this Jew lying on the road to Jericho. It is easy to come to the simple conclusion that when our Lord commands us love our neighbors as ourselves, he is telling us to love those who are different from us. Love those people who are of a different socio-economic class from yourselves. But even Mrs. Clinton could give you that interpretation. We should expect better from our Lord.

And so we do. Not only should you love those people are of a different background than yourselves, you should love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Bless those who curse you. If you love only those people who love you, what credit is that to you? Don't even sinners love those who love them? If you lend only to people from whom you expect a return, what credit is that to you before

God? Don't even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount? If you really want to be children of your father in heaven and if you really want to justify yourself in front of God, then you will have to love your enemies. Love those whom you cannot stand. Love those people whom you avoid because you either fear them or are angered by them. Love them and pray for them and then you will be sons of your father in heaven. If you cannot stand homosexuals, pray for them and love them. If you cannot stand the people from Phelps' Baptist Church in Topeka, then pray for them and love them. If you think that someone has wronged you and you deserve justice from them, then love them and pray for them. If you want to justify yourself before God, this is what is required.

And there is more. We have not exhausted the parable. For at the end of the parable the Lord does not ask and who was the neighbor of the Samaritan who loved his enemy and cared for him and saw to his welfare. If Jesus merely wanted you to love your enemies, He would have asked this question at the end of the parable, "And whom did the Samaritan consider his neighbor to be?" But our Lord does not ask that. Our Lord asks, "And of which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

In other words, among the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? Once again the lawyer to whom Jesus is speaking is trapped. The lawyer is so used to making judgments that he will appear a fool if he does not make a judgment in this case and so he makes the judgment and it damns him. Of course the one who showed mercy is the one who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers. And then the Lord commands him to go and do likewise.

You see if you are going to justify yourself, you must not merely pay attention to who your neighbor is. That is secondary and frankly easy to do. If you are seeking to justify yourself, you must prove to be a neighbor to those whom God has placed around you. The question is not, "Who is my neighbor?" The question is, "Am I a neighbor?" In order to be a neighbor, you must prove it. Otherwise you are a priest or a Levite who is more concerned about the less weighty portions of the love than justice and mercy and who would only help those who are of the same socio-economic class as themselves.

So if you want to justify yourself before God, here are the Lord's marching orders on how to do it.

I would invited you to consider that if you are a person who is trying to justify yourself before God that would you pursue a different road. If you are a person who not trying to justify yourself before God, then you already know who it is who has proved to be a neighbor to you.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.