

# **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

**BUT OUT!**

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**Luke 10:25-37**

**Analysis by Bruce T. Martin**

25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27He answered, "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." 28And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live."

29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

[NOTE: The analysis will focus on vv. 25-29. The “Good Samaritan” story is a diversion from the core analysis but stands in the shadow of the lawyer’s initial question in v. 25; see the little “but” in v. 29 (de in Greek) that connects the lawyer’s second question to the first. The “lawyer” in v. 25 (nomikos in Greek) was a person fully versed in the Bible which was termed the “Law” (nomos in Greek) by Greek speaking Jews, and referred at least to the first five books of Moses but for some included the Writings and Prophets as well. The citation in v. 27 comes from Deut. 6:5 following Israel’s confession of faith at 6:4, and from Lev. 19:18 where one’s “neighbor” clearly refers to a close kin or fellow Israelite. But Jesus’ counter-question in v. 36 turns the idea on its head. For Jesus, the neighbor is the one who loves, not [exclusively] the one being loved. In Lev. and Deut., as also in v. 27a here, “love” is from the Greek LXX agapaseis, with imperative force; it is implied in v. 27b. For the LXX, as here, “love” towards God means the same as “faith” in God. The combination “heart, soul, strength, mind” suggests the whole, undivided person; one’s innermost “heart” cannot be separated from the acting body.]

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## **DIAGNOSIS: In the Old Creation, There Are Countless “Musts” To Do**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : “What Must I Do To Inherit Eternal Life?”

The lawyer’s super-question “What must I do . . . ?” is obviously a religious one, but it is social as well. Because the answer includes “your neighbor,” the question proves to be the question that every community must ask, without which there can be no community at all. In answering the socio-religious “musts” of becoming a civilization, humanity grows into itself. The social answer is summarized in the imperative

to “take care of one another” (see vv. 34-35) whereby all groups are ineluctably defined against all other groups, but also whereby wars are fought by *us versus them*. And since religion always (yes, always) goes hand-in-hand with a group’s culture and politics, the lawyer’s question is all too easily confused, as here, with the question of one’s salvation, or “eternal life.” The assumption is that salvation, however defined, is a matter of one’s own doing: *What must I do?* (to inherit eternal life). Even if religion invokes a higher power than any human can attain, the assumption remains that salvation is humanly doable; Under the Law, it “must” be “doable”! The Law (*nomos* in Greek), summarized in the Ten Commandments and in v. 27, can be read that way. The lawyer (*nomikos* in Greek) read it that way. In fact, all religious folk read it that way, because we are all *nomological* creatures. The lawyer’s question is thus entirely reasonable – were it not for Jesus whose death and resurrection proves otherwise. To be sure, there is a good, even godly, purpose to all the “musts” built into the fabric of creation, but there is also the inevitable failure of all those “musts” to fulfill their promise of a just society. That is especially true of all the religious “musts” we “do” in order to “live” in our communities. As nomological beings under the Law, we cannot do otherwise.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** “Love . . . With All Your Heart . . .”

The lawyer’s answer to Jesus’ counter-question in v. 26 was affirmed by Jesus’ reply, “Do this and you will live.” Yet Jesus’ affirmation, which assumes one’s undivided personhood, comes with nuances that in effect condemn the lawyer’s question. As to one’s religious doing: “love the Lord your God with *all* your heart . . . soul . . . strength . . . mind”; and as to one’s social-ethical doing, “[love] your neighbor *as yourself*.” Jesus expects one’s entire being to be answerable to

God. (When directed towards God, love is simply another word for faith/trust.) The combination of verses from Deut. and Lev., which Jesus affirms, means that personhood is indivisible, that love of God and love of neighbor are like-wise indivisible, and that this all-inclusive “love” summarizes the “right” (v. 28) socio-religious doing: in simpler words, ‘faith in God’ and ‘taking care of one another.’ But Jesus’ reply in v. 28 suggests another nuance, that what is truly at issue is “love of God,” that is, “faith/trust in the God of Israel.” This is what “inherits eternal life.” For Jesus, the central issue is whether or not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is trustworthy; hence the criterion of “love in God.” God and faith-in-God always go together! Jesus redirects us to God by making faith/trust/love *in God* wholly definitive of our personhood before God. Note in the lawyer’s question a movement away from the acting God to the acting human; then inevitably the lawyer’s second question comes into play and we start defining who our neighbor is for us to love; Jesus doesn’t take the bait. Religious folks have been asking and answering the lawyer’s questions from the beginnings of civilization. And it has always been reasonable to do so – were it not for Jesus’ death and resurrection. But from the perspective of the cross, both the question itself and its erstwhile answer have become impossible. We are not free actors in the drama of salvation, God is; for there is only one true and trustworthy Neighbor. If we could ever do any-thing to please God or to assure ourselves of eternal life, there would have been no need for Christ. So there is absolutely no “doing” of our own that can save us; and any retort to Jesus’ reply in v. 28 will always come in the form of a religious “BUT” (v. 29), *as if there must be something we can do*. There is not.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** : *We Cannot Survive Our Religious “Buts”*

In every aspect of life, therefore, we are left empty handed before the God of Israel. Not a single religious “but” will prevail. Having nothing to offer to God, we will not inherit eternal life. As we often confess, “We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” We are in a death-spiral imposed upon us by the Law of God (summarized in v. 27). That is God’s final judgment upon us, and finally God’s doing. Against such a God, if we do not curse God with our dying breath, we can only cry out for mercy.

## **PROGNOSIS: Apart From the Law There is Only Jesus Christ**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Eternal Life is in Jesus Christ (our Neighbor)*

Our text follows 10:21-24 which implicates Jesus in God’s final purpose for creation. Here, we assume Luke’s overall perspective on Jesus as the promised messiah (Christ) by whose death and resurrection “forgiveness of sins” is accomplished and proclaimed (read 22:66-71 and 24:44-49; see also 2 Cor. 5:14-21, reading v. 21b “in order that *in him* we would become the righteousness of God.”). Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplished all the promises of God for the creation (the New Creation is already *in him*), and all who trust *in him* have the promise of eternal life *in him*. In Jesus, our true and trustworthy “neighbor,” who loved us “as himself” because of his love/faith/trust “in God” (v. 27), God silenced the judgment of God’s own Law against us by raising him from the dead. Thus has the God of Israel acted, continues to act, and promises to act forever more.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *Trusting in Christ Only*

Being contrary to the Law, the reason for God’s love and mercy are incomprehensible to us. The Church’s christological dogmas

and atonement theories are merely hints at attempts to figure it out. But faith assures us that Jesus lives entirely for us! Such faith is born of the Holy Spirit and is a new creation (or mini-resurrection or foretaste or down-payment). Faith is “having Christ” for us; it is the gift of the Holy Spirit to us; it is the living Christ in us. As such it is not a human doing. But it fulfills v. 27 by making love/faith/trust a work of God alone. Our old way of doing things has died. Because we have faith in Christ, the Law is dead. As a new creation, our trust in Jesus Christ is itself “eternal life.”

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Loving One Another Without Adding a “But”***

What does faith in Christ *do*, except to do what Christ does? Answer: in faith we love one another by being neighbor to one another. There is nothing else for faith to *do*. As a new creation (albeit in the midst of the old), there are no old creation “buts” sneaking into faith and to faith’s works to preserve itself on the basis of the Law. In Christ, there are no “musts” and no “buts.” The Lawyer’s initial question is now passé, past-tense, useless. There remains only Christ’s own love and the other to be so loved: in the trenches, in the muck of life, in the shadow of death. The life of faith is thereby cruciformed in the old creation, clothed as it were by suffering reality, loving one another on no other basis than faith in Christ. This is “eternal life” because faith-in-Christ is always embodied with love for others. Though we cannot see what is yet to come, whatever “in Christ” finally means it will always be embodied love; that is, embodied with Christ’s own body, loving one another as Christ our Neighbor loves us. Or did you think, as the old creation thinks with its countless musts and buts, that “heaven” was something other than God’s love for others?