

The End of Self-Justification

William Cwirla

Luke 10:25–37

There was a man who fell among thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was a dangerous road. The steady stream of pilgrims made it prime picking grounds for thugs and thieves alike. This man was probably returning home from Jerusalem when he was jumped by robbers who stripped him, beat him bloody, and left him for dead in the ditch at the side of the road.

Three men had the opportunity to be neighbor to the man who fell among the thieves. The first one saw him and passed by on the other side of the road, as far from the man as he could get. He was a priest. The second one who saw him also passed by on the other side of the road. He was a Levite, a special priestly assistant.

There was a law that anyone who so much as brushed against something dead was ritually unclean and not able to serve in a priestly capacity. There had to be a costly sacrifice and a period of cleansing during which time the priest or the Levite could not serve. They had good reason to go on the other side of the road. In fact, they would have been foolish not to. They had an obligation to maintain ritual purity. So they did the prudent, safe, expedient thing. They did what you and I probably would have done even though we have no such law. They went on the other side of the road and refused to be neighbor to the man who fell among thieves.

A third man passed by. He came to where the man was and stopped. He had compassion on the man who fell among thieves. He knew in his guts he had to do something. He went down into the ditch, cleaned and bandaged his wounds, and set him on his donkey and took him to the local inn where he spent the night. The next morning he left the man who fell among thieves in the hands of the innkeeper, gave him two days' wages and left his Visa card in case there were any additional charges.

Who then was “neighbor” to the man who fell among the thieves? The priest? The Levite? No. The Samaritan. The half-bred heretic to whom no Jew would give the time of day much less a

drink of water and certainly not bend down to help. The Samaritan was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves. The Samaritan showed mercy.

You go and do the same thing. That's right. You heard it correctly. "Go and do likewise." Help every man, woman, and child who comes into your field of vision, regardless of how busy you are, regardless of your circumstances, regardless of what it will cost you. And while you're doing it, do it with the purest of intentions and attitudes. Do it not out of obligation or fear of punishment or promise of reward. Do it strictly out of love for the man who fell among thieves and out of love of God.

And do this perfectly for a lifetime if you want to earn eternal life by your works.

That was the question that prompted the parable. It came from a synagogue lawyer, an expert in the Torah, a master at finding biblical principles for people to live by. He wanted to test Jesus to see what Jesus would say. Would He be rigorous and demanding or liberal and lenient?

The question is the self-justifying question. It's the question seeking the loophole, the precise definition. It's the move from lower to higher specificity. "Neighbor." Who is my neighbor? If I can define this narrowly and specifically enough, I can do this commandment and, even more, I can use this commandment as evidence of my righteousness. The commandment says "love your neighbor as yourself". But, neighbor is a bit vague. What does it mean? The people next door? The people you like? Your fellow Israelite (if you're an Israelite)?

You will recognize the self-justifying question as arising from our legalistic "old Adam". We ask it all the time. I hear it all the time. Is this a sin? Is that a sin? Can I do this without sinning? Does the Bible, the church, "your church" permit this, that, or the other thing? In other words, my conscience is either accusing me and I want it to shut up, or it's looking for a way to make excuses. That man in the ditch at the side of the road, he's not my "neighbor". Why, I don't even know him. And besides, he looks for all intents and purposes dead. And if he's actually dead, and I'm a priest or a Levite, I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do with my home congregation when I arrive on the scene ceremonially unclean. Their first question to me is going to be, "What were you thinking? Why didn't you just call 911 and move on?" And so, if I define my terms just right, I can justify myself in NOT helping the man who fell among thieves.

What I'm describing here is the life of legalism and pietism. And to one extent or another, it infects each of us. You do it all the time, whenever your conscience tweaks you or when you encounter the Law. You get pulled over for speeding. What do you say? "Everyone else was going just as fast. I got passed by at least a dozen cars including a Prius. I was in a hurry. I was late to work." And therefore, I am justified in breaking the law.

It's been many years now, but I still remember the incident. I got nailed for speeding in my old Cedarlane neighborhood by a cop with a handheld radar gun at a blind corner. Granted, the corner was dangerous. There were lots of children around. People routinely went 10 to 15 mph over the speed limit. Someone could have been hurt. Perhaps someone had been which is why the cop was there. I flew around the corner at my usual 35 mph. Too late, I saw the policeman with the radar gun and four other cars pulled over. I was wearing my collar. He came to the car, asked for my license, asked me how fast I thought I was going, asked me what the speed limit was in the neighborhood. Then he looked at my collar and said, "You're probably in a hurry to get somewhere, aren't you?" "Yes, sir," I said, hoping that my collar would somehow justify my speeding. And, in fact, I WAS in a hurry. I was late for a dental appointment. I didn't go into details. The officer said, "Don't worry. I'll write you up first. You'll be on your way in no time." Thank you.

We seek to justify ourselves by the law. That's what the old Adam does with the Law. He turns it into a bargaining chip with God, as though by our commandment keeping we can obligate God to our side. There are a variety of ways we have of justifying ourselves. Among them: Justification by Loopholes and Definitions – Did God really say? Who is my "neighbor"? At what point does it become "adultery"? How far is too far? How much is enough?

Justification by Comparisons and Measurements – I'm not as bad as those people over there. I go to church fairly regularly, give as much as I think I can, etc.

Justification by Righteous Causes – I'm a pro-life, pro-same sex marriage, pro-environment, pro-universal healthcare, pro-human rights, women's rights, immigrant rights, animal rights, pro-[insert the name of your righteous cause here] and therefore God loves me and approves of me regardless of the other stuff I do and say.

Justification by Appeal to Inner Goodness – "Deep down, I'm a really good person."

Justification by Generalization – "I've led a good life overall."

Justification by Appeal to Justice – “He hit me first” and therefore I was justified in hitting him.

Justification by Made Up Laws – “I don’t drink, smoke, play cards, or dance.” Never mind there are no commandments against these things, somehow we feel justified.

There are countless others, I’ll quit at seven. You get the point. Whenever we use the Law to justify ourselves, we are going to find that the Law will turn on us and condemn us. Kill us. The Law was not given to justify us before God, but to silence every mouth, to condemn every person, to kill Sin and the sinner, to magnify and amplify Sin, to consign all people everywhere to disobedience, death, and damnation.

There is only one way for a sinner to keep the Law. Faith. The law is upheld by faith in Christ, who alone kept the Law perfectly in our place. There is only one way to quiet that accusing/excusing conscience of yours and that is faith in Christ, trust that Jesus has done in His flesh what you cannot do in yours, namely keep the law perfectly both outwardly and inwardly, and by becoming Sin for us, putting Sin to death in His innocent death.

Jesus became our “neighbor”. The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us. He moved in next door. Jesus became that Good Samaritan who bent down in the ditch to rescue a bloodied and beaten humanity. Jesus loved His neighbor and He loved God. He fulfilled the Law with His love. And in His love for us, for all of humanity, for His whole creation, He became the man who fell among thieves, crucified between two of them, bloodied and beaten by a world who did not want Him or His way of salvation. He was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.

Do you wish to be justified before God? Then don’t look to the Law and search out loopholes and legalisms. Look to Christ on the cross. Trust in Him and not in yourselves. For a man is justified by faith alone in Christ alone apart from any works of the law, including the law that says love God and love your neighbor.

Look again at that man who fell among thieves lying there naked and bleeding in the ditch. Does he look familiar to you? He looks an awful lot like Christ, doesn’t he? “As often as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.” That man is Christ incognito for you to serve. You, and you alone. He’s not there for you to justify yourself before God. All the good that the Good Samaritan did did not justify him before God. Everything a sinner does is marred with Sin, no matter how good, noble, and self-sacrificing.

But that man in the ditch is not some opportunity for you to notch brownie points in heaven. He's there for you to serve with God's goodness and mercy, to love as you have been loved by Christ. There are no Good Samaritan laws that can produce this kind of goodness and mercy. This comes from freedom, from one who has died to the Law. "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That is your umbrella for freedom. That is your escape route when the Law paints you into a corner and you cannot help but sin. Sin boldly, as Luther advised timid Philip, and trust Christ yet more boldly.

Don't look to the Law to justify yourself. It will damn you. Look to the Law to define and shape your love of God and love of your neighbor, whomever God puts in your path. But you are justified before God solely by His grace alone, His undeserved kindness toward undeserving sinners, through faith alone and not so much as a twitch of works, for Jesus' sake alone.

Glory be to Jesus!

Amen

SOURCE

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