

What Must I DO?

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

September 3, 2023

Luke 10:23–37

The Gospel reading today begins with the word “then”, so you know that something was going on before. What was it? Jesus had sent out seventy-two men to preach and to heal and He was now speaking with them as they were excited about all the good things that had happened: “Even the demons were subject to us in Your name!” Jesus said they should not rejoice at this but that their names were written in the book of life. Then He prayed, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”

Adults approach God as adults. We are wise and have understanding. We should be growing and learning. But we’re so adult about it. According to Jesus it is to little children that the Heavenly Father has revealed His salvation to. What does this mean? It means that salvation can only come to those who are recipients of it. In other words, we cannot gain salvation on our own. We must be as little children. In today’s Gospel reading when an expert in God’s law comes to Jesus and asks Him, “What must I do to obtain eternal life?”, well, he’s already gotten it wrong. What must you do? Nothing. Isn’t there anything? No, there is nothing you can do to gain salvation.

Except Jesus appears to entertain this man’s request. Well, what does the law say? You know it, you are an expert in the law. And he does know it, as we see from his response: Love the Lord your God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. These are the two great commandments, they encompass the entire law of God. “You have answered correctly,” Jesus tells him. “Do this and you will live.” We Lutherans know that you are saved by grace, not by works. Jesus apparently is not very Lutheran. He is straight out telling this man that if he keeps the law he will be saved. What gives? Is Jesus teaching salvation by works?

The man was not content with this answer, Luke says that he needed to justify himself. We have seen this before, a few weeks ago with the Pharisee in the temple thinking he was justified in the sight of God because of how good he was and how he stayed away from evil. Jesus says, no, it is not him, not the good person, but the wicked one who was justified—the tax collector who knew his sin and despaired of his sin and simply pleaded to God for mercy. This is what he received from God, mercy. He was the one who was justified. It is by grace, not by what you do.

But this man wants to justify himself. Who is my neighbor? If you can tell me who I’m supposed to love then I’ll be able to rest secure in my salvation. Jesus now tells him a story. It is one of the more familiar Biblical stories, the Good Samaritan. Everyone loves this parable. A person is left for dead and it’s not his fellow countrymen, who also happen to be professional clergy, who help out the man but a despised Samaritan. The Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

But this Samaritan had compassion on this man. He goes out of his way to help him. He saves his life. He spares no expense and sacrifices for this man. Sound familiar? Of course, this is what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. He has had compassion on us, we who as the Bible says are enemies of God, and He has spared no expense in saving us, sacrificing even His own life for us. Yes, this is a beautiful picture we have in this good Samaritan, Jesus of course being the true Good Samaritan.

But if we stop there we’re just kind of ignoring the last part, which is where Jesus asks the man, “Who was a neighbor to the man in the ditch?” The man responds, “The one who had mercy on him.” But here’s the clincher: Jesus tells him, “You go and do the same.” And there Jesus goes again seeming to tell us that if
[over]

we do what we're supposed to do we'll be saved. What does He mean by this? How do we square this with the clear teaching of Scripture that we are saved not by works but by grace, particularly by our Lord Himself in His suffering, death, and resurrection?

We began by looking at what comes before today's Gospel reading. What comes after it is another well-known passage of Scripture. Mary and Martha were sisters and were friends of Jesus. Martha invited Him into their home. Martha was a good hostess. No, an excellent one. We all know those who go out of their way to welcome you, they make you feel at home, they prepare everything for you so that it is just right. That was Martha. And then there's Mary. Mary doesn't do a thing. She just sits there. Jesus comes into their home and being a teacher starts teaching. And He has a ready audience in Mary. She doesn't give a second thought about preparing anything for Jesus. She doesn't care one bit about her sister slaving away in the kitchen so that Jesus can have a good meal. No, she just sits and listens.

When Martha complains to Jesus He tells her that she's worried and distracted by many things. Mary in fact has chosen the better thing and it won't be taken away from her. No, "Thank you, Martha, for all that you have done for Me!" No, "Martha, you've done a lot! Why don't you sit for a while and I'll ask Mary to take over for you." No, Jesus seems to think that the good thing to do is nothing and the not as good thing to do is to actually work, and even more, to work hard and to work for someone else, particularly the Lord of the universe!

It makes no sense. Was Jesus just supposed to go without food? Was Martha really supposed to be like Mary and also sit on her duff and just listen? Yes, that is exactly what Jesus is saying. That is, what He is saying is the same thing He was saying before the man came to Jesus, we must be as little children.

What must I do? I must become as a child. I must not try to figure out what I must do to be saved. I have already been saved in Baptism. I must not work and even work hard to be saved. Christ has already accomplished salvation in His suffering and death on the cross. There is nothing I could do that would add to that.

And because He has done it I can then go forth freely and be a neighbor to those God has placed in my life. I can freely have compassion on others and spare no expense to help them in whatever needs they have. You are baptized. You are saved. Jesus has had mercy on you. Go and do the same. Amen.

SDG

Rev. Paul L. Willweber
Lutheran Service Book Lectionary: One-Year
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, San Diego, California

SDG

Rev. Paul L. Willweber
Lutheran Service Book Lectionary: One-Year
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, San Diego, California