

“Bad Questions and Simple Obedience”  
 Sermon for 8 Nov. 2015  
 Text: Luke 10:29-37

Theme: Knowing what to do is seldom the problem,  
 our willingness to do it frequently is!

Conventional wisdom has it that there are no bad questions. Conventional wisdom is wrong. There are questions asked which are aimed at disrupting the class. There are questions asked to get the teacher off track, to delay progress, stretch things out *when the homework hasn't been done*. There are questions asked that are mainly egotistical and serve to draw attention to the inquirer. And there are questions asked aimed at embarrassing, or shaming somebody. Questions asked with purity of motive and a sincere desire to learn are always good and welcome—indeed of this latter variety there are no bad questions.

So, there are bad questions and the lawyer's question, **What must I do to inherit eternal life?**, is a prime example of them. It is a bad question because of the stealth, self-vaunting motivation behind the question. The lawyer **stood up to put Him to the test**. So the question was insincere, or biased; it was designed to either make Jesus look bad, or the lawyer to look good. The moderators of CNBC learned this in spades during the third presidential debate which they “hosted.” They asked questions aimed at ridiculing, belittling and defaming the candidates which opens our minds to the motivations that we can harbor which make our questions either insincere, or treacherous. *The world is a dangerous place, and people are dangerous beings*. The scenario of the parable of the Good Samaritan reinforces the truth of this observation. If our hearts are rotten, spiritually diseased, or sinfully sick, we will ask bad questions. Jesus, recognizing this about the lawyer, handles the situation well and performs heart surgery right before the eyes of the very crowd that the lawyer sought to impress. And, before we get too far from this place of diagnosis, we should note that the lawyer was, in addition to being treacherous, into self-justification. That insight hangs on the “clarification question” the lawyer asks: **And who is my neighbor?** Frankly this question is a better one than the first: **What must I do to inherit eternal life?**

In order for us to proceed with understanding what is going on here, I want to put forth a proposition: what you know, or even think you know, shapes what you “see.” (Corollary: if you don't know much, you won't see much!) Regardless, the state of your mind and the quality of your questions will always be revealed together to the attentive listener. Therefore Jesus responds to the test question with two questions of His own: **What is written in the Law? How do you read it?** Do you see what Jesus is doing? He is asking the man to cite his sources. He wants to know what books he has studied and he wants to know, secondly, how he interprets the primary documents. The approach to Scripture was, even back then, twofold: what is the text? And, how do you interpret the text? We may suppose that Jesus knew that this man knew the answer to the question he was asking. The lawyer replies: **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.** (v. 27) Now there are four clauses in the lawyer's response, but the fourth

clause is not written in the Law of Moses! It comes from the human traditions of commentaries on the Scripture. This means that the lawyer is not restricting himself to the primary documents—he is of the more liberal bent. Now I find it striking that here Jesus, over all, registers that the lawyer’s adapted response is correct. Well, good for you, sir, **You have answered correctly, do this and you will live.** (v.28)

Jesus does not say, “*Know this* and you will live” . . . He says, **do this and you will live.** And therein lies the rub! Although the lawyer knows what God would have him do (from the Law of Moses), he has no intention at all of doing it. He has a stubborn, rebellious and defiant heart which will not submit itself to God’s will. Again, what we have here is not an intellectual problem but a sin problem, a moral and willful problem *and this is a spiritual condition not limited to the breed of lawyers!*

So, outed, flushed out as a treacherous man, the lawyer quickly tries to save face. He asks, defensively, **And who is my neighbor?** He proposes that there is some ambiguity (the typical lawyerly out!) about the word “neighbor.” I realized as I worked on this draft that simply by asking that question, the lawyer is excluding Jesus *as his neighbor*; he is obviously not acting neighborly to Jesus in setting Him up and trying to take Him down. Why, in fact, he appears to resemble the robbers and thieves who assaulted a hapless Jewish man, who was journeying down from Jerusalem to Jericho in the parable that follows this exchange.

You see, the parable of the Good Samaritan may be the kindest, clearest and most effective way for Jesus to pour wine and oil on the lawyer’s disordered and wounded heart! Jesus doesn’t call him out and confront him—the lawyer has already exposed his heart to everyone. *Isn’t it admirable how Jesus treated an enemy?* We need to take a page out of that play book.

Knowing what to do is seldom the problem,  
a willingness to do it frequently is!

I propose that we look a little further into the lawyer’s unwillingness to do what he knows to do (**love God entirely and one’s neighbor as one’s self**). We are involved in his dilemma because we don’t want to love our neighbors either. It may be something we can resolve as a submission issue—which means we repent and get on with it. But our reluctance to love our neighbor may come from feeling “unsafe” with them. We like our new apartment, our new house but the real estate came with “neighbors.” And some of those neighbors may have fluorescent hair, blatant piercings, tattoos and huge Harley’s! They look big, mean and scary . . . not to mention, loud. But none of that disqualifies them as neighbors, none of that excuses us and none of any of that means that God didn’t know about weirdness when He gave us the command. And, you know, while we are gaping across this huge cultural divide; they are gulping and staring right back at us! I can almost guarantee that if we cross the no man’s land between us and our neighbors, both of us will be relieved and will laugh about it later.

But the Good Samaritan is not about 21st century suburban, or even rural neighbors! It is a parable that deals with two classes of people who suspect and hate each other: Jews and Samaritans. Oh, and it's also about robbers, thugs and thieves who hate whoever falls into their ambushes! The Jewish man is stripped, beaten, robbed and left to die. In this pitiable state, he is observed by two of his own countrymen who, despite being Jewish and religious (a priest and a Levite—this is not going well for the professional clergy I'm afraid) and they choose to not get involved. *How unneighborly of them! They surely know as much as the lawyer knows about the Lord's command from Moses.* But, apparently, they have no bowels of compassion.

They know what they ought to do,  
They are unwilling to do it.

So, they are disobedient to God. They felt too unsafe. But they didn't have bigotry, pride and discrimination to climb over; the injured man was one of their own. *But they still refused to be a good neighbor.*

Fortunately for this victim of violent crime, a worthless and despicable fellow (from the Jewish point of view) comes along and **he had compassion on him.** (v.33) Wait a minute what does this half-breed low life think he's doing fulfilling the law of Moses?! To the lawyer's chagrin Jesus proceeds to describe the Samaritan's neighborliness: **He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his animal** (which probably means that to the inconvenience of getting involved was added the annoyance of walking for the privilege) **and brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii** (two days' wages) **and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back."** (vv. 34-35) Here is a man who knew what to do and did it. You have to wonder is it possible that this Samaritan was an early Christian convert—one converted by Christ's earlier ministry in Sychar (recorded in John 4). Because his actions suggest that he might be such!

Christians are those who know what they ought to do  
And, even at cost and risk of peril, are willing to do.

No one ever said that obedience to God would be a cakewalk, or that we should expect life to be less dangerous so that we could safely get on with being neighbors. But if we never mix it up with unbelievers, in blatant and remarkable ways, very few of them will ever be drawn to the people of God Christ is raising up, or adopted into the extended family of the faith! This incident demonstrates the most powerful form of evangelism out there! Doing what God asks is admirable and winsome and winning.

And wonderful to relate, the mutual aggravation clause of being God's family never goes away. Christians interfere and they are interfered with . . . and it's okay. Our call is to be interruptible. If you have a need, we have mutually surrendered our right to completion . . . we see disruption as opportunity *because that is how God calls us to live.* We are those who have outgrown individualism . . . in wonderful counter-cultural

ways we have meals together, share in each others' lives, work, pray and play together. We refuse to fast-food our way through life. We teach our children how to eat with silverware, properly, and how to attend to others and share in conversations with each other. As if we were the good neighbors that we are! We know that it's a jungle out there and so, in a godly manner, we create a sanctuary among us where deeply dangerous and resentful people can experiment with laying it down, learning to trust and beginning to heal. Why? Because love is not hate. Because real change begins with a wholehearted decision to submit to God . . . to receive His wisdom as our best.

With humility we attempt to do what only God can accomplish in our midst: loving one another., grown up in Christ. In a very real way, we embrace Jesus as our model of safety, as our example of how to serve one another. We are patiently working out our indigenous hostility, mutual suspicion and impatience. We see the mess the world is in and we are part of God's wonderful intervention. The love of Christ compels us to much, much more and certainly nothing less.

Again, why? Well, God says **Love Me and love your neighbor**. It's really not that complicated. But with a new heart and divine help, it will happen more and more.

**Amen**