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Today's Gospel is the story of a man, a religious lawyer or scribe, who hears the teaching of Jesus and looks for a way to weasel himself out of it. The lawyer in this morning's Gospel has his spiritually deafened ears opened to the Gospel, only to shrink back when Jesus says to *go and do thou likewise*. He asks Jesus *what shall I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus asks him, what is written in the law? To which the lawyer recites the Summary of the Law, that which we hear at the beginning of every Mass, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself*. Jesus tells him he has answered rightly, to do this and he will live. But not satisfied with just loving God and loving his neighbor, he tries to get Jesus to define *neighbor* as narrowly as possible. As a religious lawyer, likely a pharisee who specialized in the complex ceremonial law, which was seen as the mark of holiness, he wants to know the minimum he needs to do to keep on God's good side. He wants Jesus to tell him how he can slide by with as little effort as possible.

St. Luke says the man wanted *to justify himself* -- he wanted Jesus to tell him that he was doing fine, and that he had certainly earned his way into heaven already, and that he didn't need to change his ways one bit. We may know people like this today. The lawyer asks Jesus, *and who is my neighbor*. Jesus does not spare him at all. He tells him a story which indicates that anybody who needs you to help him is a person you should help. Through this parable Jesus also corrects the lawyer's question, for the lawyer is not really concerned with who his neighbor is, but how neighborly he must be. And the moral that Jesus teaches is that to love your neighbor is to help him to do what is best for him. Jesus places no comforting limitations on the obligation to love -- such as, *You only need to help people you approve of*, or *You only need to be good to people who are good to you*. The lawyer may have reasoned his way into believing that his *neighbors were only* other like-minded pharisees.

This is what makes the Parable of the Good Samaritan so interesting. The parable addresses the lawyer's question. The lawyer is likely a Pharisee, one of the leading sects of Judaism in Jesus' day. The hero of Jesus' story is a Samaritan. The Samaritans were the ancient people of central Palestine, whose religion was believed to be a corruption of Judaism. The people who were listening to Jesus hated Samaritans. The Good Samaritan may not have even been aware of a religious commandment to love his neighbor as himself, either in his own religion, or the religion of Israel. After all, he would not have learned such a commandment from those who so hated him. Thus, the negative examples in the Parable are a

priest and a Levite on their way to or from the Temple in Jerusalem. The people listening to Jesus would have thought a priest and a Levite were the most righteous and godly people of all. But they pass the poor man by, and prove again how Jesus takes the status quo, our normal ways of thinking, and turns them all upside down.

In any event, the parable of the Good Samaritan fleshes out what the Summary of the Law means. As far as our own situations are concerned, the parable only makes things worse. We might be able to convince ourselves in the abstract that we love our neighbor, but we must admit that we are not always up to the kind of absolute and universal commitment the Samaritan displayed toward the mugged victim. So, if that is the kind of neighborly love that God demands, where does it leave us?

As is the case so often, St. Paul comes to the rescue. In today's Epistle he tells us that God made promises to Abraham. Then God gave the Old Testament Law to Moses about 430 years after Abraham. *Love God... and love your neighbor* is the summary of that Law. The Israelites, like the lawyer in this morning's Gospel, got the idea that the coming of the Law put conditions on God's promises to Abraham. Now his people would receive the promises only if they kept the Law. Likewise, they only had to keep the law regarding their neighbors if their neighbors met certain conditions. St. Paul says that this concept of keeping the commandments of God with conditions is not keeping the commandments. A promise with conditions is not a promise. And St. Paul says that when God makes a promise, he keeps the promise. The purpose of the Law is not to make God's promise conditional. The purpose of the Law and the Summary of the Law is to put us exactly where we find ourselves after we examine the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The purpose of the Law is to show us that we cannot keep it, and that we need God's forgiveness and His help. Listen to St. Paul's last words to us today. First, *The scripture hath concluded all under sin*. That means that everybody is a sinner, nobody lives up to the example of the Good Samaritan all the time, and God knows all that perfectly well. So, in a sense we can relax that we don't need to waste a lot of energy pretending we are perfect.

Then he says that after we admit that we are sinners, *the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe*. That verse is full of good things. God's specific promise to Abraham was that he would have land and descendants, a never-ending relationship to God in both space and time. Jesus is the seed of Abraham – his lineal, biological descendant. And we are included in the promises of God to Abraham by being baptized into Jesus' body and receiving God's promise to be with us forever. What then must we do to inherit eternal life? What is the

least that we must do to be on God's good side? The answer to these two questions is wrapped up in having faith in Jesus Christ, it means to repent of our sins and unworthiness, it means accepting the forgiveness He bought for us on the cross. A lively faith in Jesus Christ will instill in us a deep and abiding love for God and for the things of God and encourage us to imitate this Good Samaritan. But it is the blood of Jesus Christ that makes us right with God, not our feeble attempts to pretend that we really do love our neighbors.

If we can accept what Jesus has done for us already, then we have a new and better motivation for trying to do what is best for other people. We can try to love out of gratitude to God, not out of fear of breaking commandments. Jesus told the lawyer who wanted to justify himself to go and do what the Samaritan did. He tells us the same thing, with the guarantee that he will forgive us when we fail at trying. Or, put another way, *We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under His table, but He is the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.*