

5th Sunday after Pentecost

What must I do to receive eternal life?

Every so often we need to ask ourselves: “Am I really fair dinkum about following Jesus?”

We have to think about this because of the question in our gospel for today. An expert in the Old Testament said to the Lord Jesus: *“Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?”*

There is hardly a more important question to ask.

Each week we declare together “we believe in the life of the world to come”. But do we really know we will share in that?

Jesus’ answer to this test question put to him is clear and familiar to us: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength and with all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.”*

“Do this – and you will live”

So far, so good. The expert knew those sentences. And believed every one of them

But.

There’s one huge big insurmountable problem: and I do mean insurmountable!

It’s perfection he’s talking about: we have to love the Lord our God with ALL that we are: heart, soul, strength, mind. And love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Perfectly. Without one slip-up. ALL the time. In ALL ways.

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You and I both know that's NOT us. And if that's not us, we do not have eternal life!

A young man was listening to a preacher explaining these verses. The preacher challenged everyone in church that day to try and not lie for a whole week. "See how you go", he said. And the young man tried. Next Sunday he came to the preacher and said: "It's not fair! I was going so well for Monday and Tuesday. And then on Wednesday I started a new job." "Oh yes," said the preacher, "and what job are you doing now?" "Real Estate agent," said the young man.

He realized what the Old Testament expert refused to recognize. None of us is capable of "doing this" and living. None of us is without sin. None of us can go through a day, let alone a week, keeping this crucial command. If you don't believe me, remember that at each service we say that to God. We confess that we have messed up again.

It's stupid and a lie to think we can perfectly love God and our neighbour all the time.

But the expert is even more stupid, though he thinks he is being very clever.

Did you notice how our text says that the man wanted to make himself look good. He wanted to show he could keep this law perfectly. He wanted to justify himself.

So he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

And Jesus' well-known story, the parable, exposes this for all to see.

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Three people come across a beaten and bleeding traveler.

First, a priest, whose role is to bear with the weaknesses of his fellow humans and represent them before God, sees the traveler “and passes by on the other side”.

Second, a Levite, a temple minister, sees what’s happened and “passes by on the other side”.

Why? Those taught and trained to care for the weak and suffering pretend it’s got nothing to do with them. They think, “there are limits, you know!”

You and I both know of so many incidents where people who could and should help don’t want to get involved. Don’t want to interfere in case it will cost them, or is dangerous, or they’re in a hurry. So we hear of rape victims who are left on the street calling for help and no-one comes. Elderly folk who die in their homes and no-one notices.

The inhabitants of the area known as Samaria, to the west of Jerusalem, were distant but hated cousins of the people of Israel. Both sides absolutely despised each other. They were enemies. If an Israelite wanted to call someone the worst possible name they called them a Samaritan. They did that to Jesus himself as found in John’s gospel chapter 8. They said to him: “Are you not a Samaritan, and have a demon?”

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Astoundingly, it is a Samaritan – who himself also hates and despises all Israelites – who loves his neighbour as himself. You can hear his mind ticking over as he recites the commands of God. And he loves the beaten traveler with extraordinary and lavish kindness.

We can hear the reluctance of the Old Testament expert to accept such a suggestion as Jesus squeezes an answer out of him to the question: "Which of the three do you think was a neighbour to the man who was attacked by robbers?"

He cannot avoid the answer, but notice that he cannot even bring himself to say the nationality of his hated enemy. So, lamely, he says, "the one who felt sorry for him". Pathetic!

Put yourself in the place of the beaten traveler. You have been taught by priests and Levites to love your neighbour as yourself. And yet these exalted teachers refuse to practise what they preach. The word hypocrites comes to mind.

Then, in place of the Samaritan, put a member of ISIS, a terrorist. One whom you've been taught to hate, comes and loves you in the most extraordinary way.

It's awkward, isn't it??

The expert, as we know from Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, had been taught and had taught others that the real meaning of "love your neighbour" is brought out by adding these words: "and hate your enemies".

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BUT what does the Lord say?

“I tell you, love your enemies!”

The expert wanted to show how well he loved God and others, he wanted to justify himself. But what happened when he met Jesus was a reality check.

Jesus showed him that even the teachers of Israel like the expert picked and chose who they loved. He was like them. There was no way he really loved his neighbours – and he certainly did not love his enemies.

And if he couldn't do that, which is the easier of the two commands, how could he possibly love God perfectly? He was doomed.

As we are!

Many, perhaps a majority of Australians, think this is what Christianity is about.

That is, making ourselves look good. That followers of Jesus should try and be able to say “I do my best.” “I know what is right and I try and do it.” “I know I'm not perfect, but God knows I try.” “Charity begins at home – I can't love everyone!”

But God's standard is perfection, 24/7, absolutely perfect love for God with every fibre of our being. Perfect love, 100% costly love for others – even those who see us as enemies.

Well, we can't do it, can we.

We are failures.

But God sent Jesus to deal with our failures – and he has done this by his death on the cross.

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All my failure to love God with everything I am 100% of the time and to love others perfectly - Jesus paid the full penalty I deserve.

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, says Romans 6:23.

And that gift means you and I are set free from trying the stupid option of trying to prove ourselves, to justify ourselves. Yes, we still fail, but we are freed from the pointless struggle of trying to pretend we are better than we are. We fail, but no longer as enemies of God, rather as dearly loved children, certain of our Father's love, and determined to love him in return.