



Roanoke, Virginia  
September 30, 2018

## ***“What? How? Do?”***

*Luke 10:25-37*

**George C. Anderson**

- What is the best science fiction movie in the last quarter century?
- Who is the better singer, Taylor Swift or Katie Perry?
- What past American theologian does our country most need now to return to action?

It doesn't matter what answers you have to those questions, because I already have my own opinions and your answering is the set up to me sharing them. The answers are

*The Matrix*,  
Taylor Swift and  
Reinhold Niebuhr.

The passage I am about to read has a lawyer asking the sort of set-up questions that can be called “gotcha questions.” He not only wants Jesus to give inferior answers, he wants Jesus to give answers that will get him in trouble.

It won't sound that way at first. The lawyer asks a question that you and I might love to ask Jesus if we had the chance: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a set-up question though, because the text tells us that he asks it in order to *test* Jesus.

What I want you to focus upon is the debate that follows that question. I want you to notice how it moves from

1. What does the Bible say? to
2. How do you interpret the Bible? to
3. What are you going to do now that you understand what the Bible says?

It is rare that I preach a three-point sermon, but it looks like you are going to hear one this morning. Let's first hear the passage.



<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up **to test** Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “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; and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Back to the beginning of the passage. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”, Jesus is asked, and he answers with his own question, “What does the Bible say?”

One might think that it is Jesus who is asking a “gotcha question.” One could imagine the lawyer freezing up, panicked to have the “gotcha spotlight” turned on him.

I know that feeling. I remember, for instance, Millie and I being invited to the home of a member of my church in Jackson, Mississippi. She was the host of the classical music program on the local NPR station and she had a high opinion of me as a scholar that I didn’t want to spoil. She was excited for Millie and me to meet a visiting ballet choreographer. I thought that would be nice. But that ballet professional wanted to impress our hostess as well, and do you know what that ballet professional wanted to talk about? Do you know what he *asked* me about?

Ballet! Not just ballet, but about a controversy in the ballet community about ballet performance! In a contest for her being impressed, he set me up pretty well.

By the way, though I have been embarrassed by my ignorance many times, this actually was not one of them. It was close to a miracle. I just happened to have read a New Yorker article that week about whatever controversy he was talking about and I remembered just enough, even dropping a name or two, to get him going on whatever it was that he wanted to say to the hostess about the controversy. When we left the house, Millie looked at me as if someone else had taken over her husband’s body. “Where did you come up with all that?” she asked. I smiled and said, “I know ballet.”



That illustration took too long but I enjoy telling the story. The lawyer of our passage is not in that awkward position. Jesus knows his questioner knows his Bible, because “lawyer” here means “Torah scholar.” He is a religious scholar who knows his Torah which I am calling his Bible. Jesus knows that the lawyer has his own answer at the ready and gives him permission to come out with it. “Well, Mr. Ballet professional, what do you think about what you’re asking about?”

“Well, Mr. Bible Scholar, what do you think is the greatest commandment?” “Glad you asked.” The lawyer joins a passage from Deuteronomy with one from Leviticus: “Love God with everything and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Living in God’s kingdom,” he is saying, “means being in right relationship with God and with neighbors.”

Jesus agrees. As to content, they are on the same page... or the same pages, the first being a page in Deuteronomy and the second being a page in Leviticus (OK, scrolls, but let’s not get picky).

My first point in this three-point sermon, is that being biblical begins with knowing your Bible. We are baptizing Eleanor Link today. Her mother is a Minister of Christian Education and her father is well-versed biblically and theologically. You can be sure that Eleanor will be where I want all of us to be, and that is in programs that will teach her the Bible and the theology of the church.

I hope she does better than I did as a child and doesn’t tune that teaching out. I am embarrassed to tell you that I really didn’t learn the Bible until seminary, but at least I made up lost ground when I got there. But, if Eleanor doesn’t tune us out, we as a church are going to help Chris and Elizabeth teach Eleanor the “what” of scripture.

But it can’t stop there. It doesn’t there in our passage. The lawyer asks another question. Again, it is a set-up question because the passage tells us he wants to *justify himself*. He is not happy with their agreeing. He wants to win something here. He asks a question about *interpretation*: “So, who is my neighbor?”

In the lawyer’s day, as in ours, defining neighbor is a huge issue. The lawyer knows what he means when he says “neighbor.” Neighbors are fellow Jews... and not all Jews, but obedient Jews. He suspects, given the company Jesus keeps, that Jesus means something different by “neighbor.”

Because this is a relevant question today, I could spend the rest of the sermon on it, but I won’t. I did that in a Sunday sermon a few months ago. My focus today is on the broader question of what it means to be biblical and faithful. If the first point of my three-point sermon is that it starts with knowing what the Bible says, the second point of my three-point sermon is to figure out what it means. Content needs interpretation.

In baptizing Eleanor, her parents hope that her faith will not become something memorized and without reflection. They don’t want her faith to be an affiliation that conveniently gives her something to mark on a survey or as an answer to give when people are trying to see which religious team you are on. “I’m Christian.” “I’m Muslim.” “I’m spiritual but not religious.”



What they want for Eleanor, I want for all the children of this church. For the sake of grammatical clarity, though, I'll speak only of Eleanor in speaking for all of us. We want Eleanor to develop the kind of mind and heart that can make connections.

- connections between passages. Maybe a passage about God's love can help her interpret a passage about God's wrath.
- connections between passages and her life. What does the Ten Commandments or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount mean?
- connections between herself and a God who loves her and calls her.
- connections between her and the world that God loves:
  - between her and other people God loves;
  - between her and the people Jesus most wants her to show mercy.

In answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?", Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Because I'm not dwelling on the issue of neighbor, I'll spend less time than I ever have on the wonderful story.

A man gets jumped on the road to Jericho; robbed, beaten and left to die.

*Should-Be-Neighbor #1*, passes by, a priest.

Does he show love to his neighbor on the side of the road?

No.

*Should-Be-Neighbor #2* passes by, a Levite who, like the priest, serves in the Temple.

Does he show love to his neighbor on the side of the road?

No.

Neither of these *Should-Be-Neighbors* who serve the Temple serve the one who has been attacked and is wounded on the side of the road. They won't take the time; they won't part with the money.

Then comes a Samaritan. Samaritans, generally, are shunned as mixed race and mixed religion. The Samaritan stops to help the beaten man, bind his wounds, transport him to an inn and then pay for his care.

Jesus asks, "Who is the neighbor in the story?"

And the lawyer says, "The one who showed mercy."

So,

Point 1: Know scripture.

Point 2: Think about what scripture means.

Again, surprisingly for a conversation where one is testing the other while trying to justify himself, the lawyer and Jesus agree. This is a Bible study where both leave the room nodding their heads.



However, we are not quite done with the passage, are we? See, here's the thing we want Miss Eleanor Link to know, and what we need to remember: Jesus is not satisfied with giving the lawyer an "A" for good answers. Knowing what the Bible says is not enough. Agreeing on what it means is not enough. Jesus wants us- wants her- to live it.

He says to the lawyer, "Go and do likewise. You want to inherit the kingdom of God, then live in it. Let's not just agree that loving neighbors is part of the greatest command and let's not just agree that showing mercy to those neighbors in need is being a good neighbor. Go do it."

In the Sunday School class I am teaching about Presbyterian belief and life, I make the point that the Christian faith is not a philosophy, a nice way of seeing things. Christian faith is about an eloquent, graceful, moral way of living. To be a follower of Jesus is not in the end about content, or theology, but about following Jesus and loving ourselves and others as he showed us how to love.

As a church- as a body of Christ- let's follow and love together. Let's be the community in which Eleanor and every other child of God who can get beyond affiliation to real engagement, will have every opportunity to develop a Christian identity that comes of learning together what scripture says, figuring out together what it means, and joining together to live it and share it- be what Scripture calls, "doers of the Word." Let's inherit the Kingdom of Heaven by living it.

