

JULY 10, 2022

In this Sunday's first reading, a Lesson from chapter 30 of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses insists to the Israelites that it really is possible to keep God's law. "The word is near you . . . so that you can do it" The basic message is clear enough: You can do this.

In this Sunday's final reading, however, a Gospel from chapter 10 of St. Luke, the Lord Jesus warns us that keeping God's law is not as easy as it looks at first glance. It might be said that Jesus makes it look easy, but it is very difficult truly to love our neighbor, whoever that turns out to be. The Parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that while the love of neighbor is simple, it is not easy. The basic concept can be grasped in one session of teaching, perhaps this sermon, but getting good at it takes years, even decades, of practice.

Simple and easy are not the same thing. A deceased deacon, a high school football coach at an earlier point in his life, used to point out that lifting weights isn't rocket science, as they used to say. You learn the proper posture, get into position, and push. It's simple; but it surely isn't easy. Get into proper position, push, and repeat. And repeat. And repeat. Little by little, you find yourself getting stronger. Love of neighbor is like that. Get into proper position, push, and repeat. And repeat. And repeat. Get into proper position - resolve to obey the Lord's Jesus' commands. Then push - which is to say, do a deed of charity, and then do it again and again. Little by little, you find yourself getting holier.

Simple and easy are not the same thing. My Jiu-jitsu coach in days gone by, after showing me a move, would habitually ask "Does that make sense?" Habitually, I answered "It always makes sense; but making my body do it something different - and doing it against actual resistance is something even more different" All effective moves, I dare say, are fundamentally simple, but only a fool would call them easy. You can learn them in one or two sessions, and then get good at them with ten or twenty thousand repetitions. I say again that the love of neighbor is like that. You can learn its basic content in 10 minutes. You might get good at it after 20 or thirty years of practicing it. In practical conditions, amidst the stresses and uncertainties of life, the simple lesson of a standard sermon on being kind and generous can seem almost impossible to put into practice. Try anyway. God helping - and God's Grace is surely the absolute precondition for all growth in holiness - try anyway. You might not do very well sometimes, accompanying your good deed with grumbling and even a degree of resentment, but do it anyway. It is better to do charity imperfectly than not to do it. Do it, however imperfectly, ten or twenty thousand times, and charity will begin to come naturally to you.

What the Good Samaritan does in this famous parable of the Lord Jesus is far from easy. For one thing, he is a Samaritan. The bad blood between Jews and Samaritans had deep roots, going back almost a thousand years before the earthly lifetime of the Lord Jesus. Of all ancient Israel's tribes, the biggest was Judah in the south, from which the word "Jews" derives (at times in the New Testament it is actually unclear whether the sacred authors mean the Greek word "Judaioi" in the sense of inhabitants of the land of Judah, or in the more familiar ethnic sense of people of Jewish descent). After the death of King Solomon, his stupid and arrogant son

Rehoboam, refusing to back down from his father's high tax policies, and even declaring he would dig still deeper for revenue, provoked a rebellion by the ten northern tribes, which formed their own kingdom. For many years the big tribe of Judah and the ten northern tribes grappled each other, with the poor little tribe of Benjamin in between as their wrestling mat. Over the years, the fighting between them became increasingly merciless. That made it remarkable when, in chapter 28 of Second Chronicles, the Prophet Oded persuaded some men of the northern tribes, who had recently soundly whipped a Judean force and taken prisoners of war, not only to release the prisoners, but to cloth them, feed them, anoint them, then take them to their kinsfolk in Jericho, "The City of Palms" It seems clear that the Lord Jesus had this passage in mind when He composed the parable of the Good Samaritan. By the time of the Lord Jesus, relations between Jews and the people living north of Jerusalem had gotten even worse. The northern tribes had been smashed and massacred by the genuinely evil Assyrian Empire. In the aftermath of that massacre, and the Assyrian Empire's long desired fall, waves of immigrants flowed into the partly empty lands of the northern tribes. These immigrants intermarried with the survivors of the northern tribes to form the new nation of Samaria. The most obnoxious of the Samaritans thought of the Jews as a has-been race whose time had passed, and the most obnoxious of the Jews thought of the Samaritans as "half breeds" There were enough obnoxious people on both sides to poison completely the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. By the time of the Lord Jesus, the far northern region of Galilee, the Lord Jesus' home region, had become Jewish; but in between Jewish Galilee and the original Jewish homeland of Judea lay Samaria. Galileean Jews, like the Lord Jesus, traveling through Samaria to Jerusalem often ran into trouble. Certainly, no one expected a Samaritan to help a Jew on his journey. The Samaritan in today's parable, however, went out of his way to do so,

The Jew in today's parable was actually returning home from Jerusalem, perhaps meaning to return to Galilee. He was doing the usual thing for such a journey, avoiding Samaritan territory by going east to Jericho, then crossing the Jordan and passing north through the Greek settled territory of Ten Towns ("The Decapolis") to enter Galilee from the east. Now, I have traveled the 17 miles, and 3200 feet, from high Jerusalem to low Jericho. Jerusalem is pleasant. Jericho is pleasant. The territory in between is desert, and such grim desert that it makes Sweetwater County look fertile. That 17 mile stretch of boulder strewn desert was notorious as a lurking place for bandits (many centuries after the Lord Jesus first taught this parable, the first task of the Knights Templar was to protect pilgrims traveling between Jerusalem and Jericho from these bandits) Traveling by himself, the Jew in this parable was struck by such bandits, robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Also traveling by himself, the Samaritan in this parable saw him, and cared for him. In between, a Levite, going to Jerusalem to perform his duty of assisting in the Temple services, passed by. Then a Priest, going to Jerusalem to perform his duty of conducting the Temple services, passed by. Both of them had a particular problem. They couldn't tell if the body lying beside the road was dead or not, and touching a dead body would have made them ritually unclean, and unable to perform their Temple functions - and maybe the body was left there to lure them into an ambush by bandits! "Out of an abundance of caution", in today's singularly ignoble phrase, they passed by the bandits' victim, probably as quickly as possible. Not bound by the requirements of Temple service, and too courageous to let the fear of bandits keep him from a deed of mercy, the Samaritan paused. The Samaritan washed his

wounds with wine (people knew by experience that washing wounds with wine increased chances of recovery), anointed him, and brought him to an inn. The Good Samaritan then left the innkeeper two Denarii. The Denarius was the basic silver coin of the Roman Empire, considered a standard day's wage for an unskilled laborer. Two Denarii would have purchased a few days' food and lodging for the bandits' victim. The Good Samaritan's good deed was far from easy; yet it was simple. He grasped the simple principle of doing what clearly needed to be done to help the sufferer. Then, despite the difficulty, he did precisely that.

The Lord Jesus' lesson is clear enough. Love of God cannot be genuine without love of neighbor. Your neighbor is whoever life puts next to you today. Loving that neighbor is doing whatever needs to be done to get that person through this particular moment. At times that may be something as difficult as cleaning and bandaging his wounds, getting him to an inn, and then leaving some money to support him until he is back on his feet. At other times it may be as easy as smiling at the tired kid who is dishing out your ice cream. Yet, depending on how your day has been going, even smiling may not be easy. Still, you can do it. You know what to do. The law of God is very near you, and is simple. With God's help, you have only to do it.

The commandments of love of God and neighbor are not complicated. They are simple. The reward for obeying these two simple commandments is indescribably great, nothing less than sharing in divine life for all eternity. For such a reward, the effort is surely worthwhile, and effort is certainly required. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Lord Jesus reminds us that love of neighbor is sometimes quite demanding. Always simple, it is very often not easy. Indeed, it is so difficult at times that it is only possible by the presence within us of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Baptized and Confirmed, having Faith, and fed by the Holy Eucharist, we do have within us the Spirit of Jesus. Therefore, as difficult as the simple task of loving our neighbor, whoever that is, may sometimes be, let us resolve now to do it, and for the rest of this Mass ask for the help to carry out that resolve. The Lord has given us His instructions and will give us His Grace. He knows that with His Grace we can do this. The Lord says to us now what David having made all the necessary preparations, said to his son Solomon about building the Temple, "Be strong, and do it!"