

A Lawyer's Painful Lesson

From the Epistle & Gospel: Galatians v. 16. ff. & St. Luke x. 23. ff.

Gal. 5:16 Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made . He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. **17** And this I say , that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul , that it should make the promise of none effect . **18** For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise. **19** Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made ; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. **20** Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one. **21** Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid : for if there had been a law given which could have given life , verily righteousness should have been by the law. **22** But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe .

St. Luke 17:23 ... Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see : **24** For I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see , and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear , and have not heard them. **25** And, behold , a certain lawyer stood up , and tempted him, saying , Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? **26** He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou ? **27** And he answering said , 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 neighbour as thyself. **28** And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do , and thou shalt live . **29** But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? **30** And Jesus answering said , A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment , and wounded him, and departed , leaving him half dead . **31** And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side . **32** And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side . **33** But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed , came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, **34** And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** And on the morrow when he departed , he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more , when I come again , I will repay thee. **36** Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? **37** And he said , He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go , and do thou likewise.

Today's Epistle and Gospel work very well together, because the Gospel illustrates excellently the teaching of the Epistle.

St. Paul notes that *the* [divine] *promises* that were made to Abraham were unconditional, not presented as a reward for obedience to the commandments, which were given through Moses a full *four hundred and thirty years after* God spoke with Abraham. Paul is making this point emphatically to the Galatians, because they had been lapsing from their simple faith in Christ. They had come under the spell of Judaizers who were seeking to wind up these new Christians in the paralyzing bonds of legalism: "Unless you observe all of these laws that God has given, you will absolutely not be justified before Him". This is an easy sell, especially to conscience-ridden, sensitive believers, more aware of their failures than their successes, of their sins rather than their sanctification, and seeking some kind of relief.

The Gospel points out the absolute folly of the presumed observer of the Law, who fancies that his efforts to fulfill it will unquestionably receive God's approval. Our Lord Jesus accomplishes this by the use of an example of neighborly love that could only have absolutely scandalized His Jewish hearers. His illustration, like so much of His teaching, is intended to blow to bits tradition that serves to distort the intent of God's Word. His measures are never half-hearted, for He must deal effectively and decisively with the awful fruit of religious pride.

One can imagine the developing facial expressions of His hearers as Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan unfolds. Ceremonial purity would have been violated by contact with a blood-covered victim. "Why, how could one even consider such a thing?!" they might well be muttering in their hearts. "No wonder the priest and Levite passed the victim by! Perhaps they were on their way to fulfill their religious obligations..." The extraordinary duty of rescue that the circumstance calls for is fully performed by a Samaritan, who, if he had any religious scruples preventing him from acting, reflexively set them aside because of the extent of the need he perceived. His charity seems to know no end. We can see *the certain lawyer* of the text noticeably wincing at the mere mention of the Samaritan. But we can also watch as his scorn turns to amazement and unbelief, followed by embarrassment and even shame when he realizes just what Jesus has been driving at, and the enormous implications for his own behavior. And all of this had been elicited by his own cocksureness.

The point for the lawyer, for the Galatians, and for all of us, can be summed up in Paul's words elsewhere (Romans 7:12-14):

... the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.

Had the lawyer only known, before he presumptuously opened his mouth, just how much a holy God expects by way of obedience to His law! The mere presence of the pure, sinless, undefiled Son of God in their very midst, seated before them, should have instructed them about the meaning of holiness, and should have brought them to their knees in worship, adoration, and that state of abject dependency which alone leads to real, true conversion.

I wish I could be always like the Good Samaritan, but I am not. The standard has been set, however, and I must aspire to it. As soon as I am convinced I have found a foolproof method of serving God, one which will satisfy His requirements and assuage my own conscience, it is time for me to sit once again with Jesus and receive what may well be some painful instruction.

My little self-satisfied idols will once again be smashed, and I shall be obliged to join the debris left from them on the floor, seeking God's mercy and forgiveness, and His help to do things His way, not mine.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.