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In Jesus’ day, Jewish life was thick with laws. This multitude of laws was unified by the theory that they grew out of the double commandment to love: *“You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself”*—the first three commanding love of God; the following seven commanding love neighbor. When Jesus asked the lawyer, *“What does the law say?”* he easily recited this legal foundation. If we read his ego between the lines, the lawyer could not resist his chance to shine.

Now at this stage in the story, the lawyer can *read* the law, but his question was, “What should I *do*?” He reflects the same position of most people. He can cite what the law is, but when he is told to obey it, he wants specifics, he cannot enact it. He has knowledge, but does not have understanding, does not have heart. Realized understanding leads to doing. Although the lawyer may see his exchange with Jesus as a battle of wits, Jesus, the true teacher, is crafting His responses in service of the lawyer’s request. Jesus gives him the ability *to do* the double commandment.

Like most of us, the lawyer is also hampered by *“do to get”* thinking. He thinks that when he does something, what he does will win him the inheritance of everlasting life. His action will only have value because of the attached reward. So, after he correctly identifies the double commandment of love, Jesus corrects his *“do to get”* thinking. Jesus tells him, *“Do this and live.”* There is no gap between the present and the future. The action is its own reward. It is not a matter of doing something, and then waiting for the reward, presumably after death. It is a matter of participating in everlasting life here and now—through loving God and neighbor. When the lawyer combines realized understanding and illumined acting, he will experience the everlasting life that he desires. Everlasting life is in the doing.

*“But the lawyer, wishing to justify himself, said, ‘Who is my neighbor?’”* With some legal wrangling about boundaries and obligations, he wants the bottom line. Perhaps the Levite and the priest who passed on the other side may or may not have been justified by the law. They, too, might have been weighing their obligations about what they had to do or what they were excused from doing. If they touched a bleeding and/or dead man, they would become impure. If the man was not a Jew, there was no obligation. This “fine print thinking” is the air that legal minds breathe. But it’s the air that suffocates Jesus.

But Jesus’ strategy is to circumvent his tangled mind. The refusal of the Levite and the priest gives way to the energy and effectiveness of the Samaritan. Both the Levite and the priest are knowledgeable of the law, and they can recite the double commandment. But, like the lawyer himself, neither of them can do it. In the story the lawyer does not identify with the robbed and beaten man, or with the Samaritan. He, like the other two, would continue to go their way.

What is left is the compassion and creativity of the Samaritan, a picture of a person doing *“love of God and neighbor.”* We know the history surrounding Samaritans; they are hated by the Jews. In this story, the Samaritan fulfills the criteria Jesus insists on, *“But I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”*  Jesus takes the Samaritan and tells the Jewish lawyer to imitate him—for he reveals the goodness of God most clearly. This is eternal life—to live with such love and care because of mercy like God has mercy on us.

When we are able to do this, we reveal an interior connection to God who provides the strength and direction of our compassion. *“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return…and they will be children of the Most High. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”* The mercy of the Samaritan is a manifestation, a showing of the mercy of the Most High.

The lawyer’s simple response shows that he understands the story and its teaching. He describes the neighbor as *“the one who shows mercy.”* The lawyer’s question has been answered. He has gone beyond the recitation of the law. He now has *a realized understanding* of *how to do love of God and neighbor.* There is only one thing left, the most important thing, and the lawyer is now equipped for its difficult enactment. *“Go and do likewise.”*