Luke 10:25-37

The Answer to the Impossible Question

Main idea: We try all our lives to make something of ourselves. To be good enough. To matter. And at times, we actually convince ourselves that we can do it. But in living this way, we forget or ignore the obvious: that in order to be good enough, God must make us good, because only He is good.

I love a good riddle. A riddle is a question that seems impossible to answer at first, but once you figure out the answer, or are told the answer, it makes perfect sense.

Some riddles are easy and kind of cheap, I think, because while they make sense, they aren't particularly satisfying. They just feel like lame jokes. Here's an example a common cheap riddle:

> I am the beginning of the end, the end of every place. I am the beginning of eternity, the end of time and space. What am I? The letter 'e'.
>
> What is the center of gravity? The letter 'v'.

I feel like those are cheap riddles because they're usually just about figuring out a certain letter, and they have nothing to do with the actual things mentioned in the riddles.

Other riddles aren't particularly difficult, but are at least good jokes when you hear the answer. Such as these:

> What loses its head in the morning, and gets it back at night? Your pillow.
>
> A man is asked what his daughters look like. He answers, "They are all blondes, but two, all brunettes, but two, and all redheads, but two." How many daughters did he have? Three: one blonde, one brunette, and one redhead.

Those are a little more satisfying, right, because there's a definite answer that's not just a play on letters.

But some riddles actually are impossible. And sometimes they're fun, because the question itself is a joke. Like this one:

> If you try to fail, and succeed, which have you done?
>
> Assuming this is one of them, what do you call a question with no answer?

Some questions don't have answers, because they're just silly questions. And some silly questions, do have answers, but not the answers you'd expect.

In fact, the Bible sometimes raises some questions that seem impossible. Sometimes we really want to know the answers to them, but in order to get the answer, we need to think about the question in a different way, like in our passage today.

Luke chapter 10, verses 25 through 29:

> And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And 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." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29)

Father, I pray that we might not seek to justify ourselves, but that we would look to You to justify us. Help us to love You. Help us to love our neighbor. And help us to rest in Your love for us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The lawyer in this story came to Jesus to test Him. Now, this wasn't a lawyer like we think of lawyers. This was a person who was a teacher of the Old Testament law. This was someone who knew God's word, God's law, backwards and forwards, and he taught others about God by teaching them God's word, and it was this person who asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He didn't realize it, but he was asking Jesus an impossible question. He was asking what he himself needed to do to save himself. But we all know that we can't save ourselves, so the question itself doesn't make sense.

And you see, this lawyer should have known that. He knew the Scriptures, the Old Testament,, probably far better than me or any of us. He should have already known the answer to his question. And actually, he thought he did know the answer to his question, because he didn't ask this question sincerely to Jesus, but in order to test Jesus. He wanted to see if Jesus would give the right answer.

But instead of answering the impossible question, Jesus responds, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" In other words, Jesus was pointing out, "Hey, you're a lawyer! You know the Law! You tell Me what's required of you to inherit eternal life."

And, confident in himself, the lawyer responded with Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18)

Now, at this point, the lawyer must have been quite proud of himself. He got the right answer. Jesus Himself, in another place, summed up all of the law using the very same verses, saying that all of the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.

Jesus was pointing out that the commands to love God and your neighbor truly are a great summary of the law!

You see, love fulfills the law.

> Romans 13:10: Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

And love is the greatest of what remains when everything else is stripped away.

> 1 Corinthians 13:13: So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

All of the law, and all of the prophets rest on the commandments to love! And yet, the command to love is still a summary of the law. It's still law! Especially if you receive and practice it as law.

You see, a law is something you have to follow...or else. A law is something you obey in order to not get a consequence. You see, in answering the way that he did, the lawyer wasn't saying that he truly did love God, or even wanted to love God, but rather, he was saying, "I'm going to do what I have to do in order to get what I want!"

That's not love. That's rape.

You see, it's not love when you use others for your own pleasure and purposes. It's not love when you serve someone because you want something from them. It's not love when someone cries out to God, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life," only because they want to be saved from hell, in order to get something from God, taking salvation from God not as a gift, but wanting to take it for themselves, by themselves, and they have no desire whatsoever to love God with all their heart. And that's not the kind of faith God wants us to have.

It's like this. Ronnie and Natalie will be getting married next month because they love each other and want to love each other for the rest of their lives. Now, if I were to tell Ronnie, "Ronnie, you better love her. You better serve her. You better be faithful to her. You better give your life for her, because if you don't love her like that, your marriage will fail, she'll divorce you and take half your money, and then she'll sue you for child support and your kids will resent you the rest of your life!" If I were to say all that to Ronnie, I wouldn't really be asking him to love her; I'd be

asking him to love himself. Because all I did was name consequences that he'd experience if he didn't treat her that way.

But true love says, "You don't have to tell me the consequences! You don't have to tell me the rewards. You don't even have to make it a command! I want to love her! With all my heart, soul, mind, and strength! I want to love her with all that I am!"

That's true love. Love has nothing to do with what we can get, and everything to do with what we can give.

You see, the lawyer was only concerned with what he could get. He quoted the law to love, but he didn't really want to love, he only wanted to inherit eternal life, which is prophetic, because the only way to inherit something is if the person you inherit it from first dies.

In order for any of us to inherit eternal life, Jesus had to die. And an inheritance isn't earned; it's received.

But the lawyer didn't even realize what he had really asked. He was sure that he could do enough. He was sure that he could love enough. He was sure, until Jesus responds to him in verse 28.

> And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

Do this. Do it. Do it all. Do it perfectly. Because if you want to inherit eternal life for yourself, by your own efforts, you better do it without fail! Never messing up even once! Do this, and you will live!

But there's a problem with that. We can't do this. Have you ever stopped to think about how impossible these two commands are? Nobody since the beginning of time, except Jesus Himself, has obeyed them perfectly. Think about it. What would it take to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? It would mean that you would need to love God with all of who you are. All of your affections. All your emotions. All your being. All of your thoughts. All of your intentions. You would spend every thought thinking about God, every action serving God, and every moment of every day for all of your life consumed only with God. And by loving God that way, you wouldn't have anything left to love anything else or anyone else with anything, not even your neighbor, because you gave all your love to God.

And yet, we're also told to love our neighbor. Of course, we know the Bible doesn't contradict itself, so the only way to understand the second command in light of the first is to say that loving your neighbor is included in loving God. Like, if you don't love your neighbor, you can't really be loving God. That's kind of what it says in 1 John 4:20.

> If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20)

So the Bible teaches that if you truly love God, you can’t just spend the rest of your life in solitude, ignoring the world, and you can’t just be content to live your own Christian life in relative comfort, when you know that there are over a billion people in the world who live in extreme poverty, because if you love the Lord your God, your desire will also be to love your neighbor.as yourself.

And how do you love yourself? Well, some of us have a hard time loving ourselves sometimes, and yet we still do love ourselves practically. We still try to make ourselves happy and comfortable. If we’re hungry, we get something to eat. If we’re cold, we put on a coat. Even if we’re just bored, we try to cheer ourselves up by finding something entertaining to do or watch, buying new and bigger TV’s, going to movies at the theatre, and going to ballgames, sometimes spending a lot of money as we love ourselves like that.

Now, what if we loved our neighbor like that? What if when we heard about a hungry person, we actually fed them. Not just a meal, but three meals a day, plus snacks, for the rest of their lives. And what if when you hear about someone who is naked, that you clothe them? And not just old, stained, torn clothes, but new clothes, clothes that you’d buy new for yourself. When I went to Haiti on a mission trip a couples years back, we were encouraged to give as much of the clothes we brought there to the people who could never afford to buy clothes. And I went through my suitcase, and left some clothes, but I kept my favorite clothes for myself. I didn’t love my neighbor as myself, I loved myself just a little bit more.

You see, a lot of times when we help someone in need, we’re not really loving them as ourselves, we’re giving them our scraps. Our leftovers. We haven’t truly loved them. We’ve loved them just enough to make ourselves feel better. More than anything, we loved ourselves. Loving your neighbor as yourself means whatever you would typically give and do for yourself, give and do for your neighbor instead. Sometimes that means going without, so that your neighbor can have what they need, and even want, because you love them, and love is about giving.

So when Jesus said, “Do this and you will live,” I think at that moment, it hit the lawyer just how much loving his neighbor would demand of himself, more than he could ever give. And yet he still wasn’t willing to fall down before Jesus to admit his inability to fulfill the law himself, so he tried another tactic. Verse 29.

> But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)

Instead of admitting that the task was too hard, the lawyer sought to justify himself. He still thought that he could fulfill God’s requirements himself. He thought, “Well, maybe I can’t love

everyone in the world that way, but I can love my fellow Jew that way. I can love my brothers in the faith that way! I can still justify myself!”

So Jesus told him a story. Verse 30.

> Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' (Luke 10:30-35)

When we read this parable, we often turn it into a moral law. Like “Love yourself” means “love the person you find along the road, even if they aren’t of the same family and faith as you.” And that’s a good moral law. It’s the application of loving your neighbor as yourself. But even a good moral law is still just another law. And the greatest commandments are still commandments. They sound real good, all lovey dovey, but, as we’ve already seen, we’re unable to perfectly fulfill the two greatest commandments to love God and love our neighbor! Do this and you'll live? We don't have a chance!

All of the law, and all of the commandments prove two things: God is holy, and we're sinners!

You see, this lawyer went to test Jesus, but found that he himself was being tested, and he didn't measure up. So he sought to justify himself by asking “Who is my neighbor?” But I want you to notice something about the way Jesus answered this question. Verse 36.

> Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:36)

Jesus didn’t ask, “Which of these three treated the man like a neighbor,” but rather, “Which of these three proved to be a neighbor.” You see, Jesus was answering the question that the lawyer should have asked.

Rather than trying to justify himself, he should have realized that he couldn’t justify himself, and he needed someone to justify him! Rather than asking “Who is my neighbor,” he should have asked, “Who will treat me like a neighbor? Who will love me like that? Who will sacrifice Himself out of love for me?” Because no matter how much he wanted to, the lawyer couldn’t justify himself. He needed someone to love him as Himself. He needed the only One who could perfectly obey all of the law, the only One who truly loved the Lord His God with all His heart, all

His soul, all His mind, all His strength, the only One who truly loved His neighbor as Himself! He needed Jesus!

You see, the parable of the Good Samaritan isn't just another moral law to follow. It's actually the gospel. We are the man who fell among robbers! We could do nothing to save ourselves. The Levites and priests, which represent following the law, can't help us; they just walked on by. But Jesus Himself is the Good Samaritan! When we could do nothing to save ourselves, He had compassion! He came to us, bound our wounds, poured on us oil and wine, His own blood shed for us on the cross, and then picked us up. He brought us to life.

And the lawyer was right about one thing: who proved to be our neighbor when we were dead in our sin, unable to love God, unable to save ourselves? Verse 37.

> He said, "The one who showed him mercy." (Luke 10:37)

And Jesus did show us mercy. He was sinless, while we were full of sin. Yet He died in our place, taking on our sin, even becoming sin for us, so that we receive His mercy by grace through faith in Him, salvation, through His sacrifice.

And I find it very interesting that at the end of verse 35, Jesus says that the Good Samaritan would be coming back.

And, you see, Jesus is coming back. Hebrews 9 says it this way:

> And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:27-28)

Man will die, and there will be judgment. Judgment for all who still seek to justify themselves, who still strive to obtain salvation for themselves, by themselves, who still love themselves more than God, more than their neighbor, there will be judgment for all of these to prove to them that only God can justify us. And they will all learn that lesson. Because, as it says in Philippians 2:

> At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:10-11)

So are you eagerly waiting for Jesus? Has he brought you back from the dead, since you were dead in your trespasses and sins? And do you live now, not seeking to be justified, but because you've already been justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ crucified for your sin, recognizing that it's His mercy that saves you? And do you now eagerly wait for His return, because you know when He comes, you'll be fully saved from all the effects of sin in this life? If so, how now should you live now? Verse 37.

And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:37)

So, yeah, go, and do likewise. Just as Jesus loves you, and saved you, even while you were dead, go and love others! Love them even when they abuse you! Love them even when they curse you and persecute you and call you all sorts of names because of your faith in Christ! Continue to show them mercy, sharing the gospel, but not because you think you can impress God by being merciful, but because Jesus was merciful toward you.

If you think you can be good enough for heaven, you're like the lawyer, who came to test Jesus, but then was tested himself by Jesus, and then sought to justify himself. But we can't justify ourselves. We must look to Jesus, who justifies us.

You see, the common way to understand this parable is wrong because it's the same way the lawyer would have told the story. Now, he probably would have rearranged the characters a little, because the Jews despised the Samaritans, but if we think we're the Samaritan, and that we must be like the Good Samaritan, if we think we can do that and live, we're still trying to justify ourselves.

But it's when we say, "Lord, I can't do it! I can't love like that! I can't live like that! I can't justify myself!" That's when Jesus says, "I know. But I can justify you with My love."

So the answer to the impossible question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" is this: nothing. You shall do nothing, because Jesus has done it for you. Or maybe the answer is this: you must die, like the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. Because only when you're dead can Jesus bring you back to life. So die to yourself, and live in Christ.

"Buried with Christ in His death, you're raised to walk a new life in Christ."

Lord Jesus, thank You for dying for us, and raising us up with You. Help us to rest not in ourselves, but always in You, because in You alone, we have life. In Your great and merciful name we pray, Amen.

Further Study

The Impossible Question seems to be asked in one other place in Scripture:

And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:29-31)

Upon closer examination, however, it's clear that this is an entirely different question. The emphasis of the question in Luke 10:25 is on the lawyer himself inheriting eternal life himself by what he himself does. A more literal translation might be, "I shall inherit eternal life by doing what?" (τί ποιήσας ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω;)

In contrast, the jailer in Acts 16 recognized that he must be saved by another. He still asks what is necessary for him to do (τί με δεῖ ποιεῖν), but in words which avoid himself as the one who "does" anything (since the verb is in the infinitive, rather than first person active), asking in humility rather than pride. Additionally, the emphasis of the main verb "saved" (σωθῶ), being in the passive mood, is that the saving is done not by him, but by another. In other words, he recognized that only Jesus could save him; he could not save himself.