

Jesus sets us apart from the unbelieving world. He teaches us not to be like the pagans who think their prayers will be heard because of how much they say. He teaches us to love our enemies. Do good to those who harm you. Give to those who can't pay you back. After all, even the unbelievers love those who love them. Even those who don't know God are capable of being good and kind in an outward way.

Jesus isn't just giving us a set of rules to follow. He also isn't merely giving us optional bits of advice, which we can take or ignore depending on how motivated we feel. No, Jesus is teaching us the Christian life.

Why can you love your enemy and bless those who curse you? Why can you turn the other cheek to someone who slaps you and give your coat to someone who steals from you? You can do so because you have a loving Father in heaven who promises to save you, protect you, provide for you, give you justice, and cover you with his healing wings of mercy. He sees your nakedness, your tears, your guilt and shame, and he has compassion, covers up your sin, and wipes away your tears. Jesus reveals this loving Father to us. He shows us what the reason and strength of this world is incapable of showing us.

He thereby teaches us to live in a way that we are incapable in ourselves of living. What he says seems utterly unreasonable, impossible, and outrageous to conventional wisdom. You are, in fact, obligated to protect your family and care for your household, using the tools God himself provides. If you can help it, you shouldn't allow your children and spouse to be homeless, orphaned, and widowed. But this is the point. Even unbelievers know that. St. Paul says that if someone doesn't care for his own household, then he is worse than an unbeliever. Even the heathen know about these basic, everyday duties.

Even an unbeliever can know what the law is, and he can do a decent job following the law outwardly. After all, he is under the law. But Christ came to fulfill the law. He came to give us what we could never accomplish by our own natural powers. He has opened the eyes of our hearts to see what no eye can see. He opens our ears to hear what no ear can hear. He reveals to us the deep riches of the gospel, that the God of the universe, who causes light to shine out of the darkness, sent his Son into the flesh to bear our sins and gain for us an everlasting inheritance. This is what he planned to do from before the foundations of the world.

This is why Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. He thanked God for hiding these things from those who were proud of their own intelligence and wisdom. Instead, he has revealed his mercy and his heavenly treasure to little babies, to humble people who can't recognize anything special in themselves. He turned to his disciples and expressed to them how blessed they were to hear and see the things around them. Many prophets and kings longed to see and hear these things. King David, who was also a prophet, longed to gaze upon the beauty of God. And now, God has arrived in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, the Son of God has appeared to bring redemption and salvation for poor sinners.

The disciples were blessed to be eyewitnesses of this. And we are all blessed to have the faith to believe it. Because this faith can't come about from our own natural powers. We can't achieve this great blessing simply by following the elementary principles of earthly life. Even unbelievers are capable of following these principles, yet they remain blind to the truth of the gospel. They can't know the Father or the Son unless this same God opens the eyes of their hearts and minds.

If you love your family, then good. If you show kindness and pity on people around you, then this is also good. It is, after all, your duty. God has called you to this duty. He has, in fact, prepared all your good

works for you to walk in them. But God has called you to something even greater than your outward works. He has called you to faith and knowledge of his salvation in Jesus Christ. This means that he has given you the ability – not in yourself but only by God’s grace – to lose all these things. Your job, your marriage, your duties, and your own life can be stripped from you, and you are able to remain standing secure in God’s promise. This is what sets you apart from the everyday, law abiding unbeliever.

Jesus therefore teaches us not to live as those who are under the law. Live as those who have been set free from the law’s condemnation. Live as God’s children. Live with the confidence that God will always bless you. He will always defend you. He will rescue you from all evil, and he will compensate you a hundredfold for anything you have lost. In other words, live under the mercy of God. Get to know that mercy. Apply it to your life and to those around you. This is not a way for you to earn God’s favor. Instead, it is how Jesus exercises our faith in God’s favor. It’s not for us to work for our salvation. Instead, it’s how Jesus guides us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Why? Because God himself is working in us. He is guiding us, giving us new desires, new joys, and increasingly new confidence in his Word. When you must suffer in this life, God is simply binding your faith closer to his promise. When you must lose your stuff, your possessions, your reputation, and your life, God is assuring you through it all that he gives you an even greater treasure. He honors you with a greater name. He bestows on you his own life in his Son.

Jesus sets us apart from the unbelievers who are capable of doing outwardly good things. And yet, he also doesn’t let us forget about these outsiders. Because, our Lord understands what can happen if we think we are inherently better than the unbelieving world. Hypocrites think they are exempt from what even worldly people know is right. As if their special status as God’s children makes it so that they don’t need to care about the needs of their neighbor! Some ministers of the church commit adultery or use their authority and influence to harm other people in some way. Those who see themselves as good Christians justify their practice of overcharging their neighbors or lending money only as a way to take more money from those to whom they are lending. Some will bring their fellow Christians to court, relying on worldly power to get what they imagine they deserve. They say that it’s just business, as if their souls are not affected by what their hands are doing.

Meanwhile, even the unbelievers, who are blind to God’s mercy in Christ, are appalled by this behavior. Even an unbeliever, who is enslaved to his own sin, is capable of being faithful to his wife, helping someone pay off his debts, and working through disputes with his friends. God does not set us apart from the world to excuse us from what even the world knows is right.

Instead, God sets us apart from the world so that we would trust in his goodness even when the world burns up. Even when most people have lost any sense of what is right or wrong, God calls us to live with confidence that his mercy endures forever. As we sing in the hymn, “Take they our life, goods, fame, child, or wife! Though these all be gone, they yet have nothing won! The kingdom ours remaineth!”

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a story that even unbelievers can appreciate. I have visited nursing homes that are literally named after the Good Samaritan. Among the nurses and staff, there are Christians who are driven by the love and mercy of God in Christ to show care for those who are old, feeble, and close to death. But there are also those who are blind to the truth of Christ, who have no hope outside of this life and their own imaginations, yet feel a basic, natural compassion for their fellow man.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to a certain expert in the law who was trying to justify himself. This man wanted to exempt himself from what even an unbeliever can recognize he is obligated to do. He asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Yet, he misses the whole point of the law. So Jesus tells this parable to illustrate how those who are supposedly set apart from the unbelieving world end up completely blind to what remains basic and obvious to unbelievers. You all know the story. A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho gets jumped by thieves who beat him up and leave him half dead on the side of the road. Two men passed by him, not giving him more than a passing thought. These two men were a priest and a Levite, men who worked in the temple and taught the people God’s Word. They were set apart, not only from the world but even from their own people, for special service to God. Yet, ironically, they remained blind to this basic duty to help a man in need. They had no compassion, figuring that their sacred duties had somehow excused them from what God desires most.

The Samaritan in Jesus’ parable certainly resembles the mercy of God in Christ. We could spend several sermons going through all the comparisons between what he does for this poor man and what Jesus does for us poor sinners. It’s also true that many Samaritans did come to faith in Jesus during his earthly ministry and after he ascended into heaven.

We assume that the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable is a believer. But that’s not exactly the point. The point is that the Samaritan is an outsider. The Samaritans had a warped understanding of God’s Word. Yet, this Samaritan shows compassion. Here Jesus is doing something similar to what he does in his other teachings. Even the outsiders know how to do good. Even this Samaritan is capable of some basic, human compassion. So if you really want to try and work your way to heaven, then do what this Samaritan did. Love your neighbor. Otherwise, your self-righteous claim to be set apart from the world means nothing.

Of course, Jesus is not teaching that this is how we will gain eternal life. No one is capable of this. No one can know the Father unless the Son reveals him. Only the Holy Spirit gives life through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The law can’t give us life. But he is teaching a very important lesson to those who would try to use the law to justify themselves. He exposes the fact that this so called expert in the law misses the very heart of what the law requires. God desires mercy, because he is the God of mercy and the Lord of compassion.

God set us apart from the world by giving us faith to trust in what Christ has done for us. He lost his honor, his possessions, his comfort, and his very life, all to pay the debt of sin we all owed. He was driven by compassion, a much deeper compassion than what this world can recognize. To know this love of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, is to know what remains hidden to the most noble rulers and philanthropists. It remains hidden to those who rely on their own good will. It is to know the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. It is to know the mercy that endures forever.

When you share mercy, you always lose something. You lose your time. You lose money, comfort, and convenience. But the mercy of God in Christ gives us the assurance that we have in fact lost nothing. As surely as Christ bore your sin, died for you, was raised from the dead, and sits at the Father’s right hand, you can be confident that God’s mercy endures forever. His compassion never comes to an end, because it is new every morning. So live in this mercy. Bless as you have been blessed. Your reward is in Christ, who promises that your eyes will behold him. Amen.