

AMOS 7: 7-17 (p. 750)

JULY 10, 2022

LUKE 10: 25-37 (p. 843)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We are listening Lord, listening for your still, small voice to quietly whisper to our hearts. Please teach us your Truths, and instruct us in your Will. And of course, empower us to walk in your Ways with every single step we take. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"BOUNDARY LINES"

What must I do to inherit Eternal Life? That's the \$64,000 question, isn't it? Or for the younger crowd, Jeopardy's Final Answer! It's what everyone wants to know, right! Just give me the Bottom Line, Lord! What does it take to have eternal life? Which actually means, which laws apply, and which ones don't? What rules do I have to follow, and which ones can I let slide? What are the minimum requirements, Jesus? What lifestyle choices do I have to make in order to be saved? Where are the Boundaries Lines, Lord? Specifically? You know, the lines that I have to color inside of, to dwell in the House of the Lord forever! The Golden Ticket, if you will, to walk through the Pearly Gates?

"What must I do to inherit Eternal Life?" And Jesus answers, "You know"! "You already know"! And we do! "What is written in Scripture?" What did Moses tell you? What did the Prophets say? We know! And so did the guy questioning Jesus! Only he didn't want to hear the answer, let alone do it! He'd rather "go his own way"! I mean, how bad can eating that apple really be?

This guy is an “Expert”, it says. And his area of expertise is “The Law”. He is a deeply religious man, steeped in the Jewish Torah. But he “stood up to test Jesus”. I have run into people like that, over the years. Maybe you have too? And I have to admit, I’ve been a person like that at times, over the years. Maybe you have too? This man jumps up and questions what is being taught. Only his goal isn’t Truth. He already knows that. No, he is trying to justify himself, his actions, or more likely his inactions. You know, validate his personal wants and desires! Rationalize, if you will, explain, or excuse his personal choices!

Notice that he is not just a heckler from the crowd. This guy knows a thing or two. He’s not new to the Faith either. You simply cannot become an “expert” overnight! He is educated, quite possibly a religious teacher. A Lawyer, some translations say. He most likely works in the Temple, or at the very least, Worships there on a regular basis! He might be a Pharisee even, a member of the Great Sanhedrin. We don’t know, for sure. But we know he knows his stuff, right? He’s an expert, who approaches Jesus with the quintessential question!

Rabbi, in order to be in Blissful Communion with Almighty God—to live in perfect Harmony with my Creator, forever—to be Righteous in the Eyes of the Lord—what must I do? Spell it out for me. Make it clear and concise. Tell me, as if I were a first-grader, where the Boundary Lines lay? To which Jesus answers, “You know. You do. It’s right there in the Scripture.”

Now if you are following along in your Bible, hold your finger there on Luke for a moment, and flip back to our first reading from Amos. It's on page 750 in your pew Bibles. Less than a hundred pages in Scripture, but over seven hundred and fifty years in time! Yet notice the astounding parallels!

Amos is also addressing Boundary Issues. Israel, God's Chosen People, the Heirs of the Exodus, have repeatedly colored outside the lines! Instead of Obedience, they have offered Arrogance and Pride! Instead of Praise and Prayer and Adoration, they go through man-made Traditions and Practices! Instead of Character and Values and Compassion, traits that witnesses to the Grace of God, not to mention the Love of God—they model Narcissism and Conceit, traits that only point to themselves!

Amos is not an expert, like the man in Luke. He is just a regular guy. He tells us that he is neither a Prophet nor the son of a Prophet. Amos is a shepherd actually, a man who also tends sycamore-fig trees. He's a Fruit Farmer and Rancher, who comes on the scene out of nowhere, from an out-of-the way place, in the middle of the ordinary and every day. Sound familiar? Amos has a vision, or a series of visions from God, all concerning right and wrong! And he is told that God is going to measure His people with a Plumb Line.

This is a Plumb Line? It's a string attached to a weight. And the weight on the end is called a "Plumb Bob", which I'm sure they named it after me! There is no guessing with a Plumb Line. It's an extremely simple, yet accurate, method of alignment!

With a Plumb Line, you can tell immediately when something is crooked. It's obvious! The weight keeps the string perfectly vertical, straight and true. When you build with a Plumb Line, everything is set in accordance with the line. Everything, then, comes out right! Builders often use Lasers today. But the principle is exactly the same. The line is fixed, and straight, just as it should be! And everything is measured off that line!

You see the metaphor, right? It is really quite simple. God has given us lines, boundary markers, clearly defined borders if you will, that we are supposed to stay within. And that's what we measure off of, because that's what God is going to use at the time of the Reveal! The Lord is going to determine who stands straight and true, according to His lines, not ours! We can't just build any old way we want to! There is going to be an accounting, a reckoning—with Blessings for those who build their lives correctly, and Judgments for those who don't! It's simple! And the choice is yours! You know the difference, says the Lord. You really do. You even have the Blueprint, right here in The Book! Now go and build your life accordingly! "Because someday," says the Lord, "I'm going to determine who measures up!"

Again, Amos is not an expert in the Law. He is addressing an expert in the Law, though, a priest from Bethel named Amaziah! Bethel, by-the-way, means "House of God". Amaziah is a Priest who serves in the House of the Lord. So, the king, Jeroboam, a politician, doesn't really want to hear how corrupt he is. Or how far away he has deviated from the Lord's decrees! Which really doesn't surprise me!

But neither does the Priest, the man of Faith, a member of the Religious Establishment. Neither the Priest, nor the Politician, want to hear what God has to say! They have no desire to build in a way that is straight and true! What does that say? Better yet, what does it say to us, today? I mean, look around!

I have run into all kinds of people over the years, many of who were well-versed in the Faith. Some had fancy titles in front of their names—Reverend, Bishop, Evangelist, Priest! The vast majority though, didn't. Many of these people worked extremely hard at doing "the right things" for God. Some even spent hours and hours, each and every week inside a House of Worship, like Amaziah and the Pharisee! While others, never so much as stepped through the doors! But all of these so-called pious "experts", seem to share one thing in common. They all knew, or believe they knew, what the Lord requires of them!

Some were convinced it's what you do! Others, that it's what you say! Still others that's it's all about how you feel! Some just knew that Communion, or Baptism, had to happen in a rigidly prescribed manner in order for Salvation to occur. Others, that belonging to the right Church, or group, is the key! Still others would say that it's what's in your heart that matters! Or that Salvation is directly proportional to your personal experience! Others believe that being a good person is what it takes! That's your ticket in the door! Good Works is the path to Eternal Life!

Only if that's the case, then how many "Good Works" do you need to do? And how good, would you say, is good enough? "I have never killed anyone. So, I must be going to Heaven, right. Oh, I've thought about it, often actually, especially lately, but that's all." "You know, I do donate a lot of my time. And of course, all my old furniture." "I am kind to small children and animals, and sometimes even to grown-up adults!"

We "Experts in the Law" often attempt to justify ourselves, don't we? We say, "I think God really meant...". Or, "I know that "my god" would want me to be happy". Or, "Times have changed, you know". Or the Classic! "I believe in God, and that's all I really need to do. That's what it says in the Bible, right? For God so loved the world, that everyone who believes in Him will inherit Eternal Life!"

But there is more to it than that, isn't there! Even Satan believes in God. And the word, "believe", in places like John 3:16, actually means to "accept", or "trust in", to "acknowledge that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life" and then respond by "following Him as Lord"! "Believe" is a verb, in Greek. It's an action word. Believing is not just an intellectual ascent that God is real! So, what must I do to inherit Eternal Life?

You know, says Jesus. You do. You already have the answer. What does it say in Scripture? And again, we do, don't we? On some level, I think everyone realizes that they are ultimately accountable to God! We know, in our hearts, that God has certain standards of conduct, clearly defined Boundary Lines!

Oh, some of us may want to deny these! And some of us may choose to ignore them!
Some of us may simply hope, and ironically pray, that God is so loving that He'll just overlook all of our willful disobedience! But deep down we know, don't we?

Someday there will be an accounting, just like Jesus says. Someday we will all stand before the Judge. And the outcome of that will be that the sheep will be ushered off in one direction, and the goats in another? So, if that's the case, and it is, then how come we don't take God at His Word? Why is it that we keep trying to make up our own rules, to twist the Plumb Line? Why do we work so hard at justifying our own, self-created standards? Or ask rhetorical questions to justify ourselves, like, "who is my neighbor?"

We know. We do. We clearly see the Boundary Lines. Or we could, if we but look. They are right here in Scripture! What does it say? ...No, we know! The only question is; "Are you willing, in a world that tells you that there is no Judge, no higher standard of righteousness than 'what you want', 'what feels good to you', 'what seems right to you'—are we willing to love, and obey, the God who will one day call for a reckoning?"
What must I do to inherit Eternal Life?

A Pharisee, an expert in the Law, stands up and asks the same question that God asks through the Prophet Micah. "What does the Lord require"! And Jesus gives the same answer that Micah does. "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good"! "You know," says our Lord, "What does it say in Scripture?"

This religious expert has grown up in Synagogue school, and most likely been trained and tested by some of the best minds of his time! He's an Elder in the Faith, a man who other people come to when they need answers, the "Go-To" guy on Theological matters! Yet here he is, asking Jesus about a subject that is clearly within his area of expertise! He knows!

It's written on the inside of his Mezuzah, that little cylinder that hangs on the doorpost of his house! It's curled up on the inside of his Phylactery, that leather box that he and the other Pharisees wear as a headband or bracelet! It's Moses' Number One Commandment in the Top Ten! It's the Shema, Israel's Daily Call to Prayer from Deuteronomy 6; "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength!" That's what the Lord requires! And then, just to make sure that he's got all the bases covered, our religious guy tacks on a passage from Leviticus 19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus says, "Yeah! You are right! But tell me, what exactly does that mean?"

Again, the religious person, like many of us religious people, is trying to justify himself, defend what he does, or doesn't do! He is actually trying to muddy the waters of Truth by asking for a clarification of the rules! But he knows! He is just refusing to "know what he knows"! That's the definition of "hardening your heart" by the way, "refusing to know what you know", like Pharaoh did back in Egypt!

So, let me ask you, is “loving God completely”, with every fiber of your being, too difficult of a concept to grasp? Is “loving your neighbor”, to the same degree that you love yourself, really that hard to understand? Is “acting justly” and “loving mercy” and “walking humbly with your God” as Micah responds, really that tough to comprehend? Are the Boundary Lines really blurred? Maybe a story will help.

A man, traveling the seventeen-mile stretch of isolated road between Jerusalem and Jericho, is beaten, stripped, and robbed. A priest comes by, and so does a Levite, a man who works in the Temple. Both of them, however, walk around the man on the other side of the road! Sometime later a Samaritan comes by—a rejected, shirt-tail cousin from the far North. And he goes way out of his way to help the stranger!

The Samaritans had intermarried with the hated Assyrians, if you recall. And also, accepted their gods! They had stopped traveling to Jerusalem to Worship too, and just set up Houses of God anywhere they saw fit!

These were terrible people in the eyes of the faithful, people who did things in all the wrong ways! They basically have no redeeming qualities what-so-ever! And yet the Samaritan is the hero in Jesus’ story! He is actually the one who truly loved his neighbor as himself! He’s the good guy! And over the years most of us deeply pious, religious folks have put ourselves in the Samaritan’s shoes, right? We do things for those in need!

At other times though, we put ourselves in that poor traveler's shoes, right—expecting help from others when we have been beaten down along the way! Heck, some of us have even seen ourselves in the Innkeeper's shoes, especially when we were the ones caring for the sick and injured, who someone else just dropped at our door! But today, I want you to slip into the sandals of the Priest or the Levite. I'd like for us to see what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself, from where they stand? You see, it may not be what you think!

According to Jewish Law, a Priest or a Levite would have been the very last person who could stop and help this guy, no matter how much they wanted to! The Priests were the intermediaries between the people and Almighty God! They offered up prayers for the people, and performed all the required religious rituals! They collected the tithes for heaven's sake, everything that was necessary!

And the Levites were the people who actually offered the sacrifices for the people's sins, the only people who could offer sacrifices for the people's sins! According to the Law, a Priest, or a Levite, simply couldn't be defiled by blood! And they could not, under any circumstance, touch something that was dead! Either would render them ritually unclean, which would prevent them from even entering the Temple, let alone performing their duties! And if a Priest or Levite couldn't perform his religious duty, then there was no way that the sins of the people could ever be forgiven?

The so-called “bad guys” in the story are actually obeying the rules, God’s Rules, or at least what they believe to be God’s Rules! They were “loving the Lord with all their hearts,” and quite frankly, “loving their neighbors as themselves”! Or so they thought! And here, I think, is Jesus’ “rest of the story”. And also, where we need to insert ourselves.

You see, the Priest and the Levite, the Believers, the Religious Faithful, are just like we are. And the Pharisee who was talking with Jesus that day, the one who clearly already knows the rules, is right here in our camp as well. And those who are being measured with Amos’ Plumb Line, well, they’re us too! We are those who keep asking about the Boundary Lines, even though we know full-well where they really are. And we’re the ones who try to justify why they do not apply to us!

We too have established some awesome, time-honored ways of doing church over the last two thousand years! We too have assembled fantastic Worship experiences, and refined them to an art! We too have created ways of reaching out to others, and to each other in fact! We are doing some great things! But I wonder if some of these have gotten in the way of loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, and mind, and strength and soul?

Have we gotten so good at the Social Gospel, our acts of service—or the Prosperity Gospel, the whole “what’s in it for me”—that we’ve actually replaced authentic Love of our Lord, and Love of our Neighbor, with ritual Acts of Righteousness?

Are we so aware that God, is the “God of Love”, that we have totally forgotten that He is also the “God of Justice”? Have we too blurred the Boundary Lines?

Seriously! Do we too lift up our Hands in Praise, without actually Lifting up our Hearts?

Do we too open our hands in service, without ever opening up our hearts to those we serve? Do we then, like those in our lessons today, attempt to justify our actions and ourselves? Have we forgotten right and wrong? Or do we ignore right and wrong? What must I do to inherit Eternal Life? That’s the question! And Jesus answers, “You know. It’s written right there in the Law! Do that, and live!” And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we confess that our ways are not always your ways. We often blur your Boundary Lines. We tend to adjust the rules so that they are easier to accept. We twist your design some, until it looks like we have designed you instead. And then we try to cover it all up with Majestic Worship, with time-honored Traditions, by periodic acts of service, or by sticking a few dollars into a tray! But we truly want to hear, “Well done good and faithful servant”. So right now, we ask for forgiveness poured out from your Font of Mercy. We ask for clean and pure hearts, and for discerning minds. And we ask for guidance from your Holy Spirit, so that we will not make these same mistakes again.

Father, as we come before you today from various places, and from various states of separation from your will, we ask you to heal us, please. As we stand in various stages of rebellion, we ask you to change us, gently please. And as we confess our sins before you, and plead for grace, we ask you to turn your face towards us and smile. Our heartfelt desire, Lord, is to make you proud; proud of your people, proud of our faith, proud of our witness, and proud that you have called us your own. Please empower us, your Church, to do just that. Please sweep into our world and into our lives as you did at Pentecost. And if it be in your Will Lord, please start right here at Blaine Christian Church, making our lives and our service a fragrant aroma before you.

Today, Lord, we ask for your help with those we love. Please be with Please give Healing and Health, Strength and Stamina, Forgiveness and Compassion. And please Lord, help us to share in these duties as well. Hear us Father, as we pray. Our Father...