

Sermon 49: Luke 9:51-56: A Lack of Mercy

OUTLINE

The Saviour's loving determination
The Samaritan's racial rejection
The disciple's misguided zeal

INTRODUCTION

There is a great struggle in every Christian's heart, and that is the balance between mercy and justice. Both are commands, we are to be just and we are to be merciful. Both are used by our sinfulness to further our sins. Sometimes we insist on justice because we are nurturing hatred in our hearts and want to see harm come to those who have hurt us or ours. Sometimes we insist on mercy because we have cowardice in our hearts and are unwilling to pay the price to apply what is right in a particular situation. At times it seems that one cannot be true to both but you have to choose, yet God is both merciful and just. We especially struggle to balance these things when we are being unjustly persecuted or treated. When we are in the right our self-righteousness rises up with mighty vengeance and powerfully wields the sword of justice. Because our sinfulness is an expert in seeing others sins and measuring our losses rather than anothers hurts and needs we are more proficient at judging than having mercy. When God deals with sinners His mercy triumphs over judgement, but when we deal with sinners justice triumphs over mercy. This is the problem that we are seeing in Luke 9:51-56 when the disciples want to call down fire upon the Samaritans who have rejected Christ.

We are in a section dealing with the immaturity of the disciples. We have seen their lack of faith and understanding, their lack of humility, this section deals with their lack of mercy and how out of step they are with the mission of Christ. So as we look at this section we will look at it under three headings, we will look firstly at the Saviour's loving determination; then the Samaritan's racial rejection; and thirdly, the disciple's misguided zeal.

The Saviour's loving determination

V51, 'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.' This is understood to be a major turning point in the narrative of Luke's gospel. We have ended what is known as the Galilean ministry and enter into a new section where Jesus begins His journey to Jerusalem to where He ends up there in Luke 19. The Galilean ministry period was about establishing who Jesus is and what He has come to do, and there were 13 miracles recorded to illuminate this. The focus shifts from Jesus coming and who He is; to Jesus going and what He must do. These next 10 chapters have less miracles and more teaching, in particular more parables. Another major emphasis will be on the ongoing training of the disciples in preparation for the Lord's departure. Though this verse speaks about Jesus heading to Jerusalem He by no means went straight there. There was a long and meandering path that led there, He even returned to Galilee for a stint 17:11-37. This journey will take several months, the exact amount is not known.

Three things stand out about this verse. Firstly, when it says the days drew near, in the Greek it reads something like 'in the days of fulfillment.' This is a strange way of speaking but not if we recognize that Jesus path, His life and death, that He did was according to the plan of God. Jesus is not a victim of circumstance but fulfilling a particular mission one that necessarily includes His death on the cross. In a novel a tragic series of events may occur

where the hero is a victim of circumstances. Jesus will die in Jerusalem, and it will appear as a tragedy but remember that God has a plan. That plan is the deliberate dying of Jesus in order to save sinners.

Secondly, this verse speaks about Jesus being 'taken up.' This word only occurs once in the Greek NT. What does it mean? A similar word is used of Jesus ascension into heaven in Acts 1: 2, 11, 22. In the Greek translation of the OT it is used to describe Elijah's departure on a chariot of fire 2 Kings 2:9. Jesus did not come merely to die, but to die and be resurrected and to be raised to the right hand of the Father, to be given the name above all names and have all authority in heaven and on earth. The cross of Christ overcomes our sins, His resurrection overcomes our death, but it is His being the seat at God's right hand that secures the Spirit being given at Pentecost and the final recreation of all things.

Thirdly, we are told that Jesus 'set His face' to go to Jerusalem. This is the posture of fierce determination. It is a Hebrew idiom it is often used of the prophets who have to stand against a whole generation, or it is used of God when He comes to act in judgement. Here it speaks of Christ's flinty resolve to face all this is coming in Jerusalem. One commentator puts it this way: 'Jerusalem was the city where many prophets had gone to die (see Luke 13:33). Thus for Jesus to go there was to face mortal danger. In Jerusalem people plotted against him. In Jerusalem he was betrayed with a kiss, arrested by the temple police, and abused by soldiers. In Jerusalem Jesus was brought before the Jews on false charges, taken to Pilate the governor, and then on to Herod the king, before being sent back to Pilate. In Jerusalem an angry mob called for his crucifixion, until finally the governor gave in to their violent demands. In Jerusalem his disciples left him. And in Jerusalem Jesus was stripped naked and nailed to a cursed tree—in Jerusalem he was dead and buried.'

But as Hebrews 12:2 says, 'who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.' The joy of doing the Father's will and the joy of securing our salvation was why He was willing to do it. Is. 53:11, 'Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.' Jesus was willing to face all of this suffering because He is willing to save sinners. To catch a sight of the holiness of God can be a terrifying experience because when we see how unworthy we are we cannot dare to believe that a God so holy would save us. To see God's holiness but not see His willingness to save in Christ could drive us to despair. See here in Christ' resolve, in His willing embracing of more pain than we can imagine, His willingness to save unworthy sinners. This shift in focus to Jerusalem speaks of His loving determination.

The Samaritan's racial rejection

V52-53, 'And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.' We come now to an altercation between the Samaritans and Jesus' disciples. The Samaritans are the descendants of the 10 Northern tribes who were conquered by Assyria 700 years before Christ. They are named after Samaria which was the capital of the Northern tribes where Jerusalem was the capital of the South. Assyria's foreign policy involved mixing together the cultures and religions of those regions they conquered. As a result those from the North became compromised. You will remember in the book of Ezra when those from the Northern tribes tried to help rebuild the temple they were rejected and were not allowed to participate. This led to them building their own temple on Mt Gerizim. John 4:20 recounts the conversation between Jesus and

the Samaritan woman and the debate about which mountain was the right mountain to worship on. The Samaritans did purify their religion somewhat but it was still considered a heresy much like the JW's would be to us today. They only accepted the first 5 books of the Bible as scripture. During the intertestamental period one of the Maccabean rulers destroyed the temple at Gerizim. The Jews and the Samaritans were racial and religious enemies. Samaritans were viewed as defiling and unclean. Jews would take a three day detour in order that they did not have to go through their region. And if they had to go many Jews took their own food because they could not trust the food that the Samaritans ate.

In light of this view Jesus' decision to go to their village. Jesus' primary mission was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but not His exclusive mission. Luke as a Gentile notes several instances where Jesus interacts with or uses Samaritans in parables. This is the only instance that is negative in tone. Jesus will tell the disciples to take the gospel and make disciples in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria even to the ends of the earth. There are no untouchables that we must avoid when preaching the gospel. We follow Jesus' example in taking the gospel to all.

The Samaritans however want nothing to do with Jesus. We do not know whether they rejected Him particularly or whether they just hated Him because He was Jewish but we are told that they would not show hospitality to Him because He was intending to go to Jerusalem. This action on Jesus' part implied that He thought Jerusalem was the correct place to worship, and it was.

So these Samaritans reject Jesus because He is Jewish and because they think that their own views are correct. They hold all the history between the Jews and the Samaritans against Him and are happy to deal with Him on the basis of ignorant prejudice denying the most basic common decency to Him.

How should we respond to racial and religious hostility? How did the disciples respond? Let's look.

The disciple's misguided zeal

V54-56, 'And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them.⁵⁶ And they went on to another village.' Our main characters are James and John, these brothers who had earned for themselves the nick name, Sons of Thunder, Mk. 3:17. Here are these young men, they are full of the righteousness of their cause, and they are full of misunderstandings about the nature of God's kingdom. On the one hand these filthy Samaritans, these unclean half-breeds have rejected them as Jews; and they have dared to reject the actual Messiah who has condescended to visit them; and they have the nerve to resist proper worship to go on in Jerusalem. On top of that hasn't Jesus already warned that those who reject the one whom Jesus sends, rejects Him, and the one who rejects Jesus rejects the Father too, 9:48. If ever there were people who deserved punishment in the eyes of these disciples, it was these Samaritans.

James and John convinced that they and Jesus are on the same page, ask Jesus whether He would like them to call down the fire; or by implication whether He will call down the fire Himself. The fire here is probably a reference to when Elijah called down fire on men sent from Samaria in 2 Kings 1:10, 12, 14. Perhaps they are thinking of the precedent of God

judging Sodom and Gomorrah, revealing their own opinion of these judgement deserving sinners.

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to save sinners but the disciples are volunteering to destroy them. So Jesus rebukes them. Now depending on what translation you have you might have noticed some missing words, here is what John MacArthur says, 'The words and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them"' are not in the oldest manuscripts, indicating that somewhere in later history a scribe wanted to clarify the rebuke and borrowed from other texts. Nonetheless, the principle that Jesus came to save the lost is clearly taught in those borrowed passages (Luke 19:10; John 12:47).'¹

There are three corrections that Jesus makes to the disciples that apply to us as well. Firstly, we see the problem of misguided zeal. J. C. Ryle has some wise words for us: 'Facts like this in the Gospels are carefully recorded for our learning. Let us see to it that we mark them well, and treasure them up in our minds. It is possible to have much zeal for Christ, and yet to exhibit it in most unholy and unchristian ways. It is possible to mean well and have good intentions, and yet to make most grievous mistakes in our actions. It is possible to imagine that we have Scripture on our side, and to support our conduct by scriptural quotations, and yet to commit serious errors. It is as clear as daylight, from this and other cases related in the Bible, that it is not enough to be zealous and well-meaning. Very grave faults are frequently committed with good intentions. From no quarter perhaps has the Church received so much injury as from ignorant but well-meaning men.' This zeal can be misguided in evangelism when we become too forceful with people in our desperation to see them saved. This can translate into zealous political action as we vent our anger on line, in protests, and foolishly portray Jesus as in full approval of any political party today. We can become zealous in defending a particular doctrine and anathematise those who are of the faith but who disagree with us.

John Newton paints the picture of a mature saint with this gospel saturated zeal: 'The Christian, especially he who is advanced and established in the life of faith, has a fervent zeal for God, for the honor of His name, His law, His gospel. The honest warmth which he feels, when such a law is broken, such a Gospel is despised, and when the great and glorious name of the Lord his God is profaned, would, by the occasion of his infirmities, often degenerate into anger or contempt towards those who oppose themselves, if he was under the zeal only. But his zeal is blended with benevolence and humility: it is softened by a consciousness of his own frailty and fallibility. He is aware, that his knowledge is very limited in itself, and very faint in its efficacy; that his attainments are weak and few, compared with his deficiencies; that his gratitude is very disproportionate to his obligations, and his obedience unspeakably short of conformity to his prescribed rule; that he has nothing but what he has received, and has received but what, in a greater or less degree, he has misapplied and misimproved. He is, therefore, a debtor to the mercy of God, and lives upon His multiplied forgiveness.

And he makes the gracious conduct of the Lord towards himself a pattern for his own conduct towards his fellow creatures. He cannot boast, nor is he forward to censure. He considers himself, lest he also be tempted; and thus he learns tenderness and compassion to others and to bear patiently with those mistakes, prejudices, and prepossessions in them, which once belonged to his own creature and from which, as yet, he is but imperfectly freed.

¹ MacArthur, J. (2011). Luke 6–10 (p. 313). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

But then, the same considerations which inspire him with meekness and gentleness towards those who oppress the truth, strengthen his regard for the truth itself, and his conviction of its importance. For the sake of peace, which he loves and cultivates, he accommodates himself, as far as he lawfully can, to the weakness and misapprehensions of those who mean well; though he is thereby exposed to the censure of bigots of all parties, who deem him flexible and wavering, like a reed shaken with the wind. But there are other points nearly connected with the honor of God, and essential to the life of faith, which are the foundations of his hope, and the sources of joy. For his firm attachment to these, he is content to be treated as a bigot himself. For here he is immovable as an iron pillar; nor can either the fear of the favour of man prevail on him to give place, no not for an hour. Here his judgment is fixed; and he expresses it in simple and unequivocal language, so as not to leave either friends or enemies in suspense, concerning the side which he has chosen not the cause which is nearest to his heart.²

Secondly, we see the issue of mistimed judgement. Some have come to this portion and think that Jesus is condemning all judgement. We must be very clear that He is not. In Luke 10:13-16 we will see Jesus Himself warning of the certainty and terribleness of judgement that is going to come upon certain towns because they have rejected Him. The issue is not whether there will be a judgement or not, but when it will be. These disciples have an overrealized eschatology and so think that this judgement must happen now. Jesus is teaching them that this is not the time for judgement but the time for mercy. We along with the disciples need to realise that this delay in God's judgement is no weakness or forgetfulness but a deliberate respite for the purpose of salvation. This is what Peter clearly indicates in 2 Peter 3:9, 'The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.'

Thirdly, misunderstood role. The disciples wrongly thought that they were to be God's instruments bringing judgement to the earth. They were so consumed with notions of military victory and establishing a political kingdom that they mistook their role. 2 Cor. 10:4-6, 'For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.' Paul indicates to us that our weapons are not carnal ones like fire and Sulphur but rather spiritual weapons of divine power, namely the word and Spirit. Paul tells us that there are strongholds that we attack but they are not the strongholds made of mortar and stone, but arguments, opinions and thoughts. Our goal is not to subjugate people to bow the knee to Christ, but to win their hearts and minds to the obedience of Christ. The only punishments we inflict are those of church discipline as v6 outlines. I have been reading in the news lately of Muslims in France who have beheaded a teacher who showed a cartoon portraying Mohammed. Islam has a political agenda and is willing to take up arms to set up its kingdom, not so with Christianity. We wield the sword of the Spirit, we overcome satan by the word of our testimony, the blood of the Lamb and our willingness to die.

As the church we fulfill the great commission. Sure in a democracy we have opportunities as citizens to make a political difference through political action, but our made duty is that of proclaiming the message that gives life and bringing disciples into the church to protect and nurture them as embassies of Christ in a fallen world. Our love, not our military prowess;

2 <http://founders.org/2008/01/04/john-newton-on-zeal-blended-with-benevolence-and-humility/>

our holiness, not our political savvy; our loyalty to Christ, not any political party are things that are to set us apart and make us salt and light.

Christ teaches His disciples and us, that there is compassionate zeal and there is misguided zeal; there is a proper way of witnessing for Him and there is a way of aggression that we must have nothing to do with; that this is the time to spread the word of God's mercy. There will be a time of judgement, but not yet, we must use this time as one of opportunity and not lose sight of what we are here for.