

Fit for the Kingdom of God
Luke 9:49-62
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Read Luke 9:49-62

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction:

A man was walking across a tall bridge one day and saw a second man in the middle of the bridge, standing on the edge, looking like he was about to jump off. So he ran over, "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" the second man asked.

"Well, there's so much to live for." He said, "Like what?"

"Well... are you religious or an atheist?" He said, "Religious."

"Me too! Are you a Christian?" He said, "Yes."

"Me too! Are you Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant?" He said, "Protestant."

"Me too! What kind of Protestant are you?" He said, "Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! What kind of Baptist?" He said, "Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Confession of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Confession of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Confession of 1915."

So he pushed him off the bridge as he yelled, "Die, heretic scum!"¹

That story, attributed to a preacher named Emo Phillips, is, of course, fictional and an exaggeration. But it makes a strong point about how Christians sometimes view each other. In our denomination, the PCA, which is just one out of dozens of Presbyterian denominations, every pastor who undertakes the vows for ordination agrees that the Bible is the only rule for faith and practice, and submits to all of its teachings, particularly as they are spelled out in the Westminster standards. So, while different men in different PCA churches may do things a little differently as they see things from different contexts, we agree on at least 95% of everything in our faith. And yet, sometimes we treat each other as if we are on polar opposites of this huge divide. Sometimes, like when there are important issues and votes at General Assemblies, we even see differing brothers as enemies. And what about when we get outside of our denomination and the Reformed world? Are we willing to see other believers in Christ as our brothers and sisters, or do we see them as threats or as hopelessly outside the boundaries of our orthodoxy? There are, of course, times for making doctrinal distinctions, but Jesus prayed to the Father, *"the glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one."*

We have three sections in our text today, each one teaching us something a little different about the kingdom. The first section is Jesus' answer to those who would compete against, and judge, other ministries and Christians:

I. The Kingdom Is Not Exclusive to Your Group (vv. 49-50)

¹ Adapted from Raymond F. Cannata & Joshua D. Reitano, *Rooted: The Apostles Creed* (Murfreesboro, TN: Doulos, 2013), p. 104.

49 John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." 50 But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."

John the Apostle came to Jesus upset that someone was out there casting out demons who was not an approved disciple, who wasn't part of their big group following Jesus. "He's not with us, what do we do?" Surely Jesus would be as upset as he was that this guy had his own ministry going that was not part of what they were doing. So Jesus' answer must have been a surprise as He told John not to stop him – *"the one who is not against you is for you."* Paul would echo this sentiment in Philippians 1:16-18 – *"Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."* What a great attitude Paul had, that even if some people were preaching from poor and mixed motives, he just rejoiced that Christ was being preached.

I saw a post on a FB group this week that asked, "How do we answer people who say that Arminians (those who don't believe in the doctrines of election and predestination) are not Christians?" I can't even fathom how narrow and exclusive that thinking is. I mean, I'm a Calvinist and a Reformed Christian, that's why I'm in the PCA, but just because you don't agree with me on some of those things: if you believe that Jesus is Lord and accept His death on the cross on your behalf, then you are saved.

There's an old joke about Peter letting a Baptist, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, all these different types of believers into heaven, but he tells each one of them to be quiet as they pass room 8. Finally, someone asks, "Why?" "Because that's the people from the Church of Christ and they think they're the only ones here." I may be surprised at some of the people that I meet in heaven, but I won't be surprised that there are people who don't believe exactly like me there! In heaven, we will meet people from every age of history, from every tribe, tongue, and nation. They won't all be Presbyterians or Protestants and look just like us, but they will all be united in their belief in Jesus.

So, the question raised from this incident with John is: How do we feel about other churches and Christians who aren't "part of us" – are they competition or are they partners in ministry? I have easily slipped into a competition mindset at different times in my 25 years of ministry. But the Lord has worked on my heart to see other Bible-believing churches that preach Jesus as the Savior of sinners as my allies in ministry, regardless of how close to Presbyterian teaching they are. I do not consider churches that deny the authority of Scripture and don't preach that Jesus died on the cross for our sins to be allies. But as far as like-minded churches, I pray for them. I pass LifeHouse Church, Townsend Baptist, 4 The World Ministries, and several other churches on my way to worship every Sunday and I pray for them as I drive; that God will bless and increase them.

Our next six verses remind us that

II. The Kingdom Does Not Come About by Violence (vv. 50-56)

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 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. 54 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.

Do you remember what Jesus told the disciples to do if a village rejected them when they were on their mission trips? They were to wipe the dust from their feet when they left the town, and that would send the message that they had done their part and this town would be responsible to answer for its own unbelief before God. Which would result in judgment if they continued in their unbelief. But it was specifically God who would judge the town.

Jesus had nicknamed James and John the Sons of Thunder in Mark 3:17, and they certainly lived up to that name here! Where did they get this idea from that they could call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritan village? If you remember back in our study of Elijah's life last fall, in 2 Kings chapter 1, the king of Samaria, Ahaziah, sent several squads of soldiers to intimidate and make demands of Elijah. Elijah responded by saying, *"If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you"* (2 Kings 1:10a), and it happened. It seems that James and John thought they could do the same with the disrespectful Samaritans of their day.

You have to read this request to call down fire from heaven in the light of verse 51 earlier – that Jesus had set His face to go to Jerusalem. Why is that important? Because Jesus was heading to His death - He knew that He would be voluntarily submitting to being arrested, tried, and killed, and that He would not fight against those who were doing it to Him. And so any attempt by the disciples to bring about the kingdom by violence was ludicrous in the face of Jesus' self-sacrifice. Their ministry was about spiritual and physical healing and invitation, not about judgment or revenge.

This should also remind us not to write people off or give up on people in anger or frustration. When we share the gospel with someone and they don't respond, it's natural to think, "Oh well, I guess they're never going to be saved." But I've heard so many testimonies of people who needed multiple encounters with the gospel message before the Lord changed their hearts and they responded. You never know what the Lord is going to do in their lives. Additionally, sometimes we're tempted to write off the people that we disagree with, that we say we're in cultural war with, and we just wish God would destroy them: Lord, send fire from heaven on these people who want to take away Christians' rights, who persecute and reject us; that would make life so much easier for us. But that's not the way of Jesus. There will be a day of God's judgment, but for now, we are never to decide who is unreachable, but to serve those who don't know God in love, pray for them, and seek to work in harmony with the Holy Spirit to change hearts to receive the gospel.

Jesus went from being rejected to having people being very interested in following Him. But knowing their hearts, He challenged and tested their sincerity, reminding us that

III. The Kingdom Does Not Come to the Half-Hearted (vv. 57-62)

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."⁵⁹ To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

⁶⁰And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."⁶¹ Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I remember a guy that I met when I was on staff at a church in south Florida and helping with a Youth for Christ outreach. I was having breakfast with some other ministry guys and he came over and said something like, "I really like what you guys do to help kids, and I like the Bible. I'd really like to get started helping you out." We talked for a minute and my Sr. Pastor at the time said something like, "Start coming to church on Sunday mornings at 10 am and we'll keep talking." To

which he replied, “Oh no, Sundays are no good for me. I need my weekends to recover from work.” It became very clear that he was not ready to sacrifice much. I think he would have fit in well with the folks that Jesus met on the road in the passage.

Three people were considering following Jesus. They seemed to have good intentions, but you know what they say about what’s paved with good intentions. Jesus exposed their half-hearted desires and showed what was more important to them than following Him:

1) Expectations (vv. 57-58) - The first person’s issue was an issue of expectations. It was about counting the cost of discipleship. Jesus sensed that this person, as much as they declared “I’ll follow you anywhere” did not really know what it would look like to follow Him. It could look as radical as being homeless, which Jesus essentially was. He was saying that if you’re going to follow me, you have to give up the comforts you are used to. Later in Luke, Jesus will teach this: *“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:28, 33). There will always be a price for following Jesus, and Jesus knew that this man wasn’t willing to pay that price.

As we translate this to today, I’m not persuaded that Jesus is calling us to be homeless and wander the earth in a similar fashion to Him and His apostles. But He is calling us to never let material comforts and possessions get in the way of following Him. Jesus may never call us to give up our homes or make huge financial sacrifices, but we must be willing to if He asks. Additionally, we should never become so attached to living in a certain place or a certain work or financial situation that it becomes more important than God’s call on our lives.

2) Timing (vv. 59-60) - The second person’s issue was timing. It sounds like he wanted to bury his father because his father had recently died; but most commentators don’t think that’s the case or else he would have been home with his family in mourning. What he was really saying was, “Let me wait until my father is dead before I follow you,” which could be years down the road. Jesus said, essentially, “If you are going to follow me, you must come now, and you must choose me over your family.” We all still believe the fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother, but if it ever comes down to having to choose between Jesus and family, our first allegiance and priority is to the Creator of the universe, the Savior of our souls. Jesus makes no apologies for that.

3) Priorities (vv. 61-62) - The third person’s issue was one of priorities: *“I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”* Jesus knew that if this man went home to say goodbye, that he would change his mind. He needed to begin following immediately. The reference to putting your hand to the plow is to be single-mindedly plowing straight ahead. If you looked back while you were plowing, you’d go crooked. This is where that well-known gospel song got the line “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.” The claim of Jesus on your life is greater than any other claim on you.

I wish that I could just say that Jesus is weeding out those who are not committed enough to become pastors and missionaries and official licensed, salaried Christian leaders. But what did He say in verse 62? *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* His call to radically follow Him is for all believers, all of His followers. If you want to inherit the kingdom of God, it needs to be your top priority! Now, I’m not saying that you’re not going to heaven if you’re not constantly in church and plugged into a ton of ministries. But the quality of your commitment to Jesus will be shown by what you prioritize in life. If you never want to do

spiritual things, someone else has to talk you into going to church, you never want to read the Bible and learn His ways, you are never moved to pray, those kinds of things – you may need to reexamine your spiritual life and figure out if you have come to faith in Christ and have the Holy Spirit inside you. Because if you don't desire to do those things, you may not be saved. I will say what I often say: I don't want to make anyone who is truly saved doubt their salvation, but I also don't want anyone who is not saved to be deluded into thinking they are. Does Christ's call to radically follow Him upset you or have you looking for your excuses? Or do you hear that and say, *"Here am I, Lord, send me"*?

Conclusion

Listen to a few lines that were written by a man later in his life:

-“Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.”

-“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

-“By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”

-“And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He has commanded us.”

-“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Who wrote those lines? The Apostle John, of course (1 John 1:9-10, 3:11, 3:16, 3:23, 4:11). The same man who had been angry at the man who was casting out demons and who wanted to call down fire from heaven on the people that rejected them. We would not have guessed that John would become “the apostle of God's love” from what we read in this passage in Luke.² But Jesus' rebukes got through to John, and, combined with the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and many years of ministry, moved to him to understand love and God's grace in radically deep ways. No longer was he calling for fire from heaven or wanting to rebuke other believers, his message became “lay down your life for each other; love one another, because Jesus loves you.”

John concluded his first letter with: *“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life”* (1 John 5:20). What a great summary, a great reminder that Jesus was true God who became man, who came to earth to live a perfect life and die an unjust death. That death provided the way for us to be saved and brought into eternal life because He paid the penalty for our sins on that cross. We confess that truth in our lives and are made right with God through Jesus. We baptize our children and teach them the gospel as they grow. We join hands with every Christian who believes that simple Gospel message to declare it to the world. And we lay aside all of our excuses not to run hard to follow after Jesus our King. And all God's people said, “Amen.”

Benediction

1 Kings 8:57-58 – *“The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers. May He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Him, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His rules, which He commanded to our fathers.”*

² Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), p. 501.