

“Jesus: Determined to Save”

LUKE 9:51-56

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Over the past 20 years or so, I have had the privilege of writing literally dozens of letters of recommendation. Some of these are for various jobs that our members have applied for, and most of them are for various colleges or universities and some of the many scholarships that are available. But out of all of those letters, the one thing that most people ask me to emphasize is the fact that they are leaders in some way or another. And I suppose that they are assuming that most colleges are looking for students with the ability to lead. I am reminded, however, of one young woman who was applying to an Ivy League school. The application process was going very well until she came to the question, “Are you a leader?” She agonized over that question for quite a while and then she finally told the truth, “No, I am not a leader.” Well, she was pretty sure that that answer sealed her fate and that she would need to start looking at other colleges. However, after a few weeks, she got a letter from the university. To her surprise, she was accepted, and the letter said, “We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted for admission to the university. We have a freshman class of 4,298 leaders, and we think it is good to have at least one follower within the group.”

In our society, of course, it practically a sin to admit being a follower. However, as we look at the scriptures, we discover that as Christians we have been called to follow Jesus Christ. Christ is our Leader, and if we want to be Christians, then we must learn what it means to be a follower. With this in mind, I would invite you to look with me at a paragraph from God’s word where Jesus sets out on a journey, a passage where the disciples learn what it means to follow the Lord, not just physically, but also with their priorities, as they learn to make His mission their mission. The passage is found in Luke 9 (p. 1617). In many ways, Luke 9 is a turning point, because when we get to the middle of Luke 9, Jesus makes the decision to start heading for Jerusalem for the very last time. Jesus, of course, had been teaching, and preaching, and healing for roughly 3 years, but in Luke 9, the Lord gets to the point where He realizes: This is it! And in the second half of Luke 9, the disciples really start to realize that they must decide to follow the Lord no matter what. As we think about what it means to follow the Lord, I would invite you think with me, then, about a scene from the life of Christ in Luke 9:51-56. Please notice what Luke writes about the Lord, starting in verse 51,

51 When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; 52 and He sent messengers ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. 53 But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. 54 When His disciples James and John saw this, they said,

“Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55 But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; 56 for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”] And they went on to another village.

Whether we realize it or not, all of us here this morning are on a journey. We are traveling through life, and the path we are on will take us somewhere. Hopefully, we are traveling from where we are to where the Lord wants us to be. Hopefully we are following the Lord. And as we study this very basic idea, I would like for us to consider two very basic ideas from this passage we’ve just read.

- I. **First of all, we notice in this little paragraph that JESUS WAS ON A MISSION—in fact, we find here at the beginning (in verse 51) that JESUS WAS DETERMINED TO MAKE HIS WAY TO JERUSALEM.**

For those of you using the NASB (depending on what edition you are using), you might notice a footnote on this idea that Jesus ***“was determined.”*** Literally, the phrase tells us that Jesus ***“set His face”*** to go toward Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus made a decision: From this point, I will head in this direction. The phrase refers to making a firm decision, a decision to go in a certain direction no matter what. His eyes were focused on accomplishing one goal. His mission was to offer His life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and nothing could turn Him aside or deter Him from accomplishing that goal. In fact, the Bible says at the very beginning of verse 51 that Jesus made this decision because ***“...the days were approaching for His ascension.”*** In other words, in the big scheme of things, Jesus knew that it was just about time for Him to leave this earth and go back to heaven, but to accomplish that goal, He had to endure the cross. And so He set His eyes on Jerusalem, and there was nothing that could turn Him away from accomplishing what He had set out to do. And from this point on in the book of Luke, we find Jesus taking the direct route to the cross. From this point on, Jesus is no longer wandering from place to place, He is no longer a drifter or a vagrant, but He becomes very focused. One author points out that from this point on, the book of Luke reads almost like some kind of a countdown. The clock is ticking, and every moment counts. He is a man with a plan, a man on a mission.

And with this, we see the Lord’s courage as a leader. We get the idea that He is blazing a trail. He is the guy with the machete, hacking a path through the jungle. He is truly leading the way. He has set His face towards Jerusalem. He is determined to press forward. And this is certainly important for us to understand, that Jesus is a great leader. However, as we discussed earlier, a leader (by definition) must have followers. In fact, we might say that a leader without followers is just out somewhere taking a walk. And so as we read these verses about Jesus being determined to go to Jerusalem no matter what, knowing what was waiting for Him there, and as we ask ourselves the “So what” question, “Why is this passage in the Bible,” we start to understand why Luke put this in here. Luke put this account in the Bible to encourage us to follow the Lord’s example.

Just as the Lord made it his mission to save the world, so also we have been given the mission of telling our friends and neighbors about what the Lord has done for us. As Christians, we have been given a job to do that most people in this world will never really appreciate. Our mission is to take the good news (the gospel) and pass it on. Just as the Lord ***“determined to go to Jerusalem,”*** so also we can make a decision to tell someone what He did. As the Bible says in the opening verses of Hebrews 12, we are to,

...lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat

down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

And so the idea is that Jesus is our example. Just as He set His eyes on Jerusalem, so also we set our eyes on the Lord. Just as He determined to do whatever was necessary to save us, so also we determine to follow in His footsteps as we tell others what He has done. As Christians, we are missionaries. Sometimes we think of missionaries as people who move to go teach about Jesus in a far off land—we are in a far off land! We are men and women on a mission to tell the world about Jesus. And when I refer to the world, I am not referring to the 7 billion people, but I am referring more specifically to the people we already know—friends, and neighbors, and co-workers, the people we go to school with, our own families. Like Jesus, we can make a decision, we can set our faces, we can be determined reach out to people with the good news. Otherwise, we are wasting the very short time that we have to live. So, first of all, then, we find in this passage that Jesus was on a mission, and we learn from this that His mission is our mission. We follow Him by telling people what He has done for us.

II. There is a second basic idea I would like for us to discover in this passage, and that is, JESUS PRESSED ON WITH COMPASSION, EVEN WHEN HIS MESSAGE WAS REJECTED, EVEN IN THE FACE OF OBSTACLES.

In verse 52, we find that as Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, He decides to go through Samaria. That right there is asking for trouble. Most of us know that the Jews pretty much hated the Samaritans. What we might not always realize, however, is that the feeling was mutual! For just a little bit of background, please remember that the Israelites were one nation under Saul, and David, and Solomon. However, after Solomon, the kingdom divided between the north and the south. The southern tribes were generally more faithful than those in the north, but both kingdoms had their issues. It got so bad in the north that nearly all of them were wiped out and carried away by the Assyrian army in 722 BC—they basically ceased to exist (not completely...but we we'll get back to that in just a moment). Since it wasn't so bad in the south, the southern kingdom hung on a little bit longer until they finally fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. The southern tribes were taken away into Babylonian Captivity for 70 years, at which point they returned. Several weeks ago, in our Wednesday evening class, we talked about the people returning from captivity and reading the Law and realizing that they were in unscriptural marriages. Remember: God had told them not to intermarry with those who were not Jews. Well, they had done this, but when they got back from the captivity, they read the Law, they saw that they had offended God, and they repented. The Bible tells us that they had a national investigation, and they split up those families. They understood that God was serious, so they got serious. They removed themselves from those marriages that were not right in the sight of God.

But what about the Samaritans, where did they come from? The Samaritans are the descendants of the small handful of survivors from the Northern Kingdom. Over time, their small group of refugees had also intermarried with the locals, but unlike those from the Southern Kingdom, those in the North did not repent—they remained in those relationships. So, over time, they continued to drift spiritually. They intermingled with the pagans, and over time their faith was basically a mixture of Judaism and paganism. They had their own priesthood, and they even set up their own place to worship. You might remember the Woman at the Well in Sychar (in John 4). When Jesus went there and asked this Samaritan woman for a drink, the two of them had a conversation, and in the conversation, the woman was concerned about the place of worship. The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, ***“Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”*** So, there was a division, and the Samaritans had settled right there in

the middle of Israel. The whole place was ruled by Rome, but the Samaritans had kind of carved out their own little area.

Well, as you can see from the map, this presented a little bit of a problem. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. It would be an understatement to say that they were prejudiced against each other. But, the Samaritans were right there in the middle! We have Jews up in the Galilee area, and we have Jews down around the Jerusalem area, and then we have this huge blob of Samaritans right there in the middle. Well, if you were a faithful Jew at the time of Christ, you had two options. You could go right through the middle or you could take a really inconvenient detour. It would be a little bit like one of us trying to get to Gary, Indiana, without going through Illinois. Yes, it is possible, but it would be difficult. We could go through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, or we could go around through Iowa, Missouri, and Kentucky. It would be easier, of course, to go right down I-90, but imagine that those people hate us. Imagine that we might not be able to get a hotel room. Imagine not being able to stop for gas. Imagine the fear of getting attacked if we stop at a rest area. If we get a flat tire, it might be "game over." So with this by way of background, notice what Jesus did. As He is up there in the north, the Lord sets His face toward Jerusalem, He sends messengers on ahead to make reservations (as we might say today), and then we find in verse 53 that those messengers were rejected **"...because He was traveling toward Jerusalem."** Again, normally we think of the Jews hating Samaritans, but here we find that the feeling was definitely mutual. Some messengers come in to make some plans, and when the Samaritans learn that Jesus and His disciples are headed for Jerusalem, that's it! The answer is "No! You people are not welcome here!"

And then we find that James and John hear about this! You might remember that James and John were known as the **"Sons of Thunder."** Actually, **"thunder"** is not a perfect translation. Their actual nickname (given to them by the Lord) is probably a little bit closer to **"Sons of Rage."** The word the Lord used is Aramaic (not Greek or Hebrew, but the actual dialect the Lord actually spoke), and this word is used only one other time anywhere in the entire Bible. When Nebuchadnezzar saw that the three young men would not bow down to his statue, the Bible says that the king reacted with "rage." Literally, it refers to being so mad that you're shaking! That is the word that is used to describe James and John. They were the "Sons of Rage," and there is a good reason for that nickname! When they hear about the messengers being rejected, James and John basically say, **"Let's nuke the place! Smoke 'em! Let's wipe these arrogant ingrate uncivilized red-neck half-breeds off the face of this earth! These people do not deserve to live!"** In my opinion, James and John were probably thinking about Elijah. If you look at what happens earlier in this chapter, we find that Peter, James, and John had gone up on a mountain with Jesus to pray, the appearance of Jesus was changed, and they all met Moses and Elijah. So, with this being very fresh on their minds, James and John were probably thinking, "Hey, if Elijah called down fire from heaven on the soldiers of the king of Samaria (like he did in 2 Kings 1), then maybe we can do the same thing! Lord, just give us permission!" I will let you decide whether that's what they were thinking, but it is interesting that they had just met Elijah earlier in this chapter, and Elijah (as far as I can tell) is the only other person anywhere in the Bible to have ever called down fire from heaven for the purpose of killing people. But the idea is clearly that James and John are a little bit too eager to call down some retaliation, a little too quick with the trigger. By the way, do you remember what Jesus told His followers that they were supposed to do when they were rejected by a village? I'll give you a hint: It is in the same chapter! Back up in Luke 9:5, Jesus told His disciples, **"And as for those who do not receive you, as you go out from that city, shake the dust off of your feet as a testimony against them."** That's a little bit different, isn't it, from what they actually wanted to do?

And so we find in verse 55 that the Lord rebuked them for their suggestion. And then, at the end of verse 56, we find that they then simply went on to another village. They refused to get sidetracked by this distraction.

They kept on pressing forward on their way to Jerusalem. The point was not to destroy people, the point was to save people. We remember God's message through the prophet Ezekiel. I am so proud of the three kids in the Wednesday evening kids class. Keola and Patsy let them choose what they are studying, and they chose the book of Ezekiel. Anyway, in the book of Ezekiel (in Ezekiel 18:32), the Bible says, ***"For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord God. "Therefore, repent and live."*** God, therefore, would rather not punish. Punishment is coming for those who refuse to repent, but punishment is not what God is about. James and John had apparently not quite learned this lesson...at least YET.

At this point we have a translation issue. For those of you using the NASB, you will notice that there is an additional quote (set apart in brackets), as Jesus says, ***"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."*** The footnote explains that the earliest manuscripts of the Bible do not contain this information. We have discussed this idea before, so we won't go into too much detail here. But the idea is that we have thousands of New Testament manuscripts. As we compare the manuscripts, we find that they are almost identical. However, there are just a few variations. This is one of those variations. Apparently, the oldest manuscripts do not contain the extended rebuke. But even with this phrase being open to discussion, it seems that the message is very clear. No matter what happened on that journey to Jerusalem, Jesus was not going to get distracted. He was not going to beg and plead with these people. He was not going to stop and argue. He was on a mission to save the world, and nothing would pull him away from that. He was the man with a plan, and He was certainly not going to waste time beating a door down to force Himself into a place where He was not wanted.

For just a moment, let us please consider what effect this rebuke from Jesus must have had on the other apostles. A few weeks later, at His ascension, Jesus said to His apostles (in Acts 1:8), ***"You will be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."*** And then, just a few years later, those multitudes in Samaria were being baptized by Philip, and the other apostles sent Peter and John to Samaria to check on the situation. And then, the Bible tells us in Acts 8:25 that when Peter and John had finished helping Philip, ***"...they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans."*** The apostles, therefore, must have learned something from this experience. They were rejected once, but they left the door open, and just a few years later, something changed, and Samaria ended up being one of those places that was more open to the preaching of the gospel than just about anywhere else.

For just a moment, let us also try to learn something, just as they did. It would be very safe to say that as we live the Christian life and as we do the best we can to press forward with the good news, we will face obstacles just as they did. Right? Maybe we are doing the best we can to be a good example to a member of our immediate family who has not yet obeyed the gospel. Maybe we are looking for opportunities to very gently explain the good news. Maybe we are looking for ways to praise the church. And then, right in the middle of that, our loved one says, "If you say one more thing to me about that church of yours, I'm out of here!" That can be discouraging. And the same goes for our friends at school or at work or in the neighborhood. But it seems that we have some encouragement here in Luke 9: Instead of getting discouraged, instead of calling down the wrath of God, the example here tells us to keep on doing what is right. The example here reminds us that we are not to get distracted. Most importantly, let us not have the attitude of Jonah, the attitude that we would rather see our enemies be punished than to obey God and be saved. The alternative is to show compassion, even in the face of rejection. The alternative is to show compassion, even if we would rather call down fire from heaven. As we share the gospel, let us not get discouraged. Here in south-central Wisconsin, I have been chased down the street by angry people yelling at us to take our "trash" off of their front doors. I have been yelled at. I have had doors slammed in my face. But even with that kind of opposition, let us not get

bitter, let us not get discouraged, but let us keep on pressing forward. Let us not take it personally, but as Jesus did, let us simply move on to others who might be interested. Let us overcome rejection with compassion.

Conclusion:

We started out this morning talking about how important it is to be a follower. We follow Jesus, because He is the man with the plan. Just as the Lord was determined to make His way to Jerusalem, so also we make the choice that we will tell people what He did for us. And then we also learned something this morning about how to deal with rejection. When people refuse to listen, we are not to take it personally, we are not to lash out, but we press on, following Jesus, motivated by love.

As we close, we as a congregation would like to invite those of you who are not yet followers of Christ to accept His invitation. The Bible teaches that Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins. We accept that sacrifice by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we would love to talk it over with you. If you have something that we need to pray about as a congregation, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can do it! Our baptistery heater is not working right now, but we can fill up the baptistery in about 30 minutes. The water will be about 55 degrees. You might be gasping for breath on your way down into the water. But you can become a Christian in the next half hour. If you are ready, you can let us know as we sing this next song...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com