

Jesus Forbids Sectarianism (Luke 9:49-62)



A. From the Mountain Top to the Valley

Often in our lives, mountain top experiences are followed by valley experiences. This is because the mountain top experiences often expose the darkness hidden in our hearts. Remember, Jesus rebuked the disciples in the previous passage (9:37-48) for :-

1. Powerlessness to heal the demonized boy (9:37-42) – we can hear Jesus’ frustration with the disciples as he teaches them there is a cost to receiving and maintaining the anointing.
2. Spiritual deafness to Jesus’s words (9:43-45) – because the disciples were preoccupied with something else, ‘who is the greatest among them?’ The competition was probably among Peter, James and John - the Top Trio, probably itching to talk about their supernatural encounter on Mount Hermon, which Jesus had forbidden. James and John later do the unthinkable, bringing their mother to lobby Jesus for them! (c.f. Matt 20:20-24)
3. Spiritual pride (9:46-48) – Jesus put on a very graphic, kindergarten level lesson for them, with a little child for illustration. *He who is least among you all will be great. If you want the righthand position, this is what it takes to get there - humility of a child, like this one. Not thinking fast on your feet or getting your mother on your team.*

Learning humility is a process: (1) It starts with a decision of our will; (2) then we walk through the process of becoming like Jesus in His humility throughout our lives.

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart (humble in heart), and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30).

How do we find true rest for our souls in this restless world? By learning Jesus’s humility.

B. Jesus’ Teaching on Humility Expands (9:49-56)

1. The focus is now on two particular disciples, James and John. Among the Trio, Peter had already received sharp rebukes from the Lord, from Jesus (Matt 16:23) then from the Father! (Luke 9:35) Peter received his rebukes early. Receiving the Lord’s rebuke is not necessarily a bad thing, provided we respond rightly to Him.

“The ear that hears the rebukes of life will abide among the wise.” (Prov 15:31) Hebrews 12 teaches on this important subject. Learning to take the ‘rebukes’ and ‘chastenings’ of the Lord is one of the important teachings of the New Testament. They are essential in producing the spiritual ‘sons’ in us.

2. At this point John updates Jesus on an “important ministry concern”, “*Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.”* Jesus never asked for such reports, but John had a point to prove. Who are the ‘we’ here? Probably John himself and his older brother, James. ‘Forbade’ here is imperfect tense, i.e. it was not a one-off event. They kept on stopping this man from using Jesus’ name.
3. Why?
 - a) “Jesus” was their “ministry brand name”. It was “owned” by them. Jesus gave them the authority to use His name to cast out demons, so they had the “exclusive right” to the use of Jesus’ name. And this anonymous person who never attached himself to their circle of disciples, was attracting attention by successfully casting out demons in their master’s name? And without their permission?
 - b) Remember that earlier the *disciples drew Jesus’ rebuke for failing for deliver a demonised boy*. How did this man unknown to them, manage to exercise effective ministry of deliverance when the disciples failed at it miserably? How do you think this man’s successful ministry make the disciples feel?

What is exposed here is John and James’ fragile ego because John talked too much in the hope of getting a commendation from the Lord. “Master, we protected your exclusive ministry brand name from unauthorised use outside of our camp.” Note John says here, ‘we forbade him because he does not follow with US,’ – not because the man does not follow Jesus.

- c) "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side," was Jesus' reply and His position. Jesus' disciples were to cultivate big hearts. They were not to have a sectarian and territorial attitude to others who move in different circles.

Sectarianism and territorial attitudes are different faces of spiritual pride.

C. James and John in the Samaritan Village (9:51-56)

1. This story is unique to Luke's gospel and it provides unique insight into Apostle John in his younger days. Now Jesus' work in the Galilean region has concluded and Jesus sets His face to go up to Jerusalem to be crucified. From here Luke records Jesus' ministry as He is moving from Galilee to Jerusalem, and the next 10 chapters of Luke can be seen as Jesus' last endeavour to prepare His disciples before He concludes His earthly ministry, for 'the time had come for Him to be received up.' (v51)
2. As Jesus started travelling toward Jerusalem, He sent a small team ahead of them to find a place of lodging. There was no booking system in those days, so it was very inconvenient if you don't find lodging by the evening because you have keep moving to the next town until you find something. When the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus and His disciples (even though they had rooms), it meant they were forced to travel to the next town. Why did the Samaritans reject them? Because Jesus' face was set for the journey to Jerusalem.
3. Samaritans were half Jews. In 722BC when the northern kingdom of Israel went into exile, those who remained behind intermarried with gentiles and produced 'half caste' population. The same thing happened when Judah went into exile afterwards. (Ezra 10) Sometimes these people of mixed Jewish descent were despised the most, more than the gentiles because they were seen as traitors.

Later when Judah came back from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah, Samaritans did their worst to stop them from rebuilding the walls. So there was long history of bad blood and bitter rivalry between them. Samaritans even produced their own version of the Scriptures, the 'Samaritan Pentateuch' and their own worship centre on Mt Gerazim. This is why the Samaritan woman asked Jesus, "*Our fathers worshipped on this mountain [in Samaria], and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.*" (John 4:2) Josephus tells us Samaritans were not averse to ill-treating pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, even to the extent of murdering them on occasions. (Bellum ii.232; Antiquities xx.118)

4. This rejection, slight, challenge by the Samaritans must have incensed James and John. *How dare you? When I can see the empty rooms inside! "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?"* (v54) This is the less known 'other side' of John the Beloved, who put his ear to Jesus' chest to hear His heartbeat. The 'Apostle of Love' didn't start out that way. Jesus' nickname for the two brothers, 'Boanerges', meant 'sons of thunder.' They had impetuous, impulsive, fierce side to their personality. A little like the 'Hulk' - aren't we all? This Samaritan incident pressed all their buttons.
5. But why were they so confident that they could bring down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans? Probably because they just had the supernatural encounter with Elijah a few days ago! After that experience there was further discussion on Elijah between the Trio and Jesus. "*Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?*" Jesus said, "*Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things.*" (Matt 17:10-11).

What a revelation! We do need the spirit of Elijah today, his fiery zeal for God and righteousness in order to restore the fallen altar of the Lord in the Church, and turn our hearts back to Him in repentance. But Elijah spirit is not known for much love. One major weakness in Elijah was, "I alone am left." *I am the only one right with God!* But God said to Elijah, "there are 7000 others just like you whom I can use."

6. Jesus's response was to rebuke James and John, "*You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.*"(v55) In other words, 'James, John. What you are feeling right now is not the spirit of Elijah.'

When we want to live for the Lord and be His voice to our generation, there will be rejection, spite and persecution. Can we fight these people in a personal vendetta? We need to learn to let go, and move on with God's priorities. We need to set our face to our heavenly Jerusalem, like Jesus set His 'face' towards Jerusalem. James and John's faces were probably 'red hot', but Jesus' face was 'resolute'. So our faces also must be set on fulfilling God's purposes for our lives.

D. Cost of Following Jesus (9:57-62)

On the road to Jerusalem Jesus encounters three individuals. Two men volunteered to follow Jesus. One man, Jesus called to follow Him. None of these men would make it. By reflecting on Jesus' response to each of them, we can mirror-read what is going on in their hearts.

We can also ask ourselves these questions: *Will I make it to the end? Have I counted the cost?*

1. Candidate 1 - This man volunteered to follow Jesus, *"Lord, I will follow You wherever You go."* Jesus replied, *"Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."* (v58) What did Jesus see in this man's heart? Most likely, his motives for wanting to follow Jesus were not right.

If we follow Jesus because we imagine it to be a glamorous and luxurious life, we'd better think again. If casting out demons, having the crowd's applause and appreciation, and lodging in the best Samaritan hotel along the way, is what motivates us to follow Jesus, we will be disillusioned. Jesus didn't even take this man in.
2. Candidate 2 - Jesus called this man, *"Follow Me."* He said, *"Lord, let me first go and bury my father."* Jesus said to him, *"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."* (v60) What this man was really saying is, when my father dies then I will follow You. (If his father had just passed away, he would be busy arranging his funeral, not talking to Jesus). We cannot say I will follow You and serve You when my situation is right three years later. The right time will never come. The time to serve God is now and here, where I am. The call of God doesn't wait for any man. Man must follow the call of God.
3. Candidate 3 - This man offered to follow Jesus voluntarily, but on one condition, *"Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house."* But Jesus said to them, *"No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."* (v62) What did Jesus see in this man? Jesus saw a man with his hand on the plow but looking back. Jesus knew that if this man went back to say farewell to his family, he would never come back to follow Him. He would give in to his family's needs and pressures for him to stay back.

In all three cases, the call to discipleship was to follow Jesus. It is not primarily a call to ministry or function although there is a component of it in every call, eg. preaching, casting out demons, giving a cup of water, serving and praying in many visible and invisible capacity.

Essentially it is a call to relationship - to follow the person of Jesus and to follow Him in all His ways. Let's never forget that.

We are primarily called to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we 'become' more like Him.