

**“Good Cop, Bad Cop”**  
**Luke 9:51–62**  
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Following Jesus is never easy, but in the brief passage we have read from Luke 9, the disciples must feel like they have whiplash. As we join the story, Luke says Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, a simple statement loaded with meaning that we will explore later. The first place Jesus goes is to a Samaritan village, but the people there do not receive him. So, the disciples want to rain down fire upon them, but Jesus rebukes them. He extends grace rather than judgment. Fair enough, they get that now.

But as they continue their journey, someone says, “I will follow you wherever you go,” and rather than welcoming the person with open arms, Jesus says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words, “You don’t know what you are saying!” Then, a person Jesus calls to follow him says he needs to go and bury his father first, and rather than showing compassion, Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead...” And when another person promises to follow Jesus after saying good-bye to his family, Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

“Where is the gracious Jesus?” the disciples must wonder, “Who is this harsh leader making demands?” The disciples must think this is some kind of good cop, bad cop routine, except Jesus is the good cop and the bad cop! They must feel like they have whiplash. They have chosen to leave everything to follow Jesus, they want to learn from him, but just when they think they understand what he is saying, he says something different. How do we make sense of Jesus’ actions in this story and what is the message for us?

Well, beginning with the last part of the story, perhaps it can help to appreciate the context. Jesus sounds demanding, any way we read this story. After extending grace to people who will not give him the time of day, he chastises people who want to follow him, and it’s not like their brief delay is tied to something frivolous. One person wants to bury his father and the other

wants to say good-bye to the people in his home. Jesus says they can't follow him, they aren't fit for the kingdom, unless they drop everything and demonstrate that nothing matters as much as him. He sounds demanding because he is demanding!

But how does Luke begin this story? "He set his face to go to Jerusalem..." This isn't like any other trip they have made to the holy city. This is a big trip of great significance, the last trip Jesus will make to Jerusalem, the one on which he will die on a cross. This simple statement of direction isn't just a locator for where this group of friends will be for the next few days and weeks. It signals the direction of the plot for the rest of the gospel. It is all about Jerusalem now and what will happen there. Everything takes place under the shadow of the cross.

In such a time, discipleship takes on an even greater sense of urgency, a resolute focus. The stakes are high now. There can be no fooling around for Jesus or his closest followers. Nothing else can get in the way of ultimate loyalty to Jesus. Jesus is demanding, but in this context, it makes sense that he is.

It's a bit like the sense of urgency people in and connected to Ukraine feel right now, as Mina and Gennady Podgaisky shared with us so movingly last week. If you're running to safety from a war, you leave everything nonessential behind. If you're trying to help dear friends and loved ones in the way of danger and in desperate need of food and medicine, you sacrifice anything and everything you have to do so. Cliché or not, desperate times do call for desperate measures. Surely Jesus feels a sense of desperation about where he is heading.

This helps make some sense of Jesus' pointed responses, but what is the message here for us? Is there any sense in which we ought to feel desperate right now? Perhaps there is or should be, but even if we aren't sure about that, there is something about discipleship, this matter of following Jesus, that always carries a sense of urgency and requires a resolute focus. It is to be a priority over and above everything else in our lives — that we have no other gods before God, that we take up our cross and follow Jesus, that we remain true to our baptismal confession that Jesus is our Savior *and* Lord.

To be fair, we make this confession, and some part of us wants to honor it, but far too often we resemble the people in Luke's story. We want to

follow Jesus, but we have other priorities too, some frivolous, some not. I'll never forget the father in another setting who left worship early and thus missed his son's profession of faith because he had a 12 o'clock tee time. Church life does not encompass the whole of God's realm, but is a tee time more important than a key moment in a child's faith journey? I can assure you the mother of that child did not think so, nor did the child. We have all sorts of explanations and excuses for why we really want to give our best to God in terms of time and money, but we have so many other obligations to meet.

But it's not just a matter of time and money, the latter of which our church has been very faithful with in these difficult times, the former of which we are struggling with like most churches coming out of COVID. How will we get people out of their pajamas or out of the coffee shop and back to church? But it's not just a matter of more time commitment the church needs, as do we in many ways. It's about how we approach critical issues and decisions and what role faith plays in our thinking.

A couple weeks ago CBF Executive Coordinator Paul Baxley wrote a thoughtful article in response to the most recent rash of mass shootings. He notes the diversity of thought we have in Baptist churches and how this causes great tension in times like this yet also creates space for meaningful dialogue like he experienced in a church after Sandy Hook ten years ago. But his first suggestion is that we ask different questions. He says he has heard a lot of talk about possible actions with inevitable questions being raised about the Second Amendment and passionate yet different opinions being expressed. But this shouldn't be our first question as Christians, Paul says.

"As Baptists whose faith journeys begin in the waters of baptism following a profession of faith," he writes, "we know that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is the ultimate criterion in any decision making." When Jesus is Lord over our lives, he continues, every other interest, allegiance and belief is secondary. "So, what would it mean to see this present tragedy of gun violence through the eyes of Jesus?" Paul says, "What is Jesus seeking? What does Jesus want to do? How can we join in? Do we believe Jesus is seeking a world where people are gunned down while teaching, learning, worshiping, buying groceries and seeking medical care? How do we believe the Prince of Peace is calling us to be instruments of peace, justice and healing?"

It is a compelling argument. What might we accomplish if we begin with these questions, at least in the church? How many other issues, like abortion, might we shed more light on if we begin by asking what the Lordship of Christ requires, what Jesus would do, what he would have us to do? Perhaps our context is more urgent than we think. And perhaps there are times when Jesus needs to play the role of bad cop, to make demands of us, to ask for loyalty when it matters most.

But if this feels a bit too heavy, especially the part about not being fit for the kingdom of God — that would apply to all of us at some point — there is grace in the first part of our reading. The Samaritan village that does not welcome Jesus is not cursed but rather extended grace. Why? Why do they receive grace while these other folks do not? Well, why do they not welcome Jesus?

Luke says it is because his face is set toward Jerusalem. For the Samaritans, it is not a matter of knowing what is ahead and fearing it. It is a matter of Jerusalem being a rival for the Samaritan worship site at Mt. Gerizim which the Jews who worship in Jerusalem destroyed in the 120's BCE. Samaritans are not Gentiles. They are another kind of Jew. The tension between these people is internal, this is a family dispute, and family disputes are more difficult to resolve. We feel more tension with other kinds of Baptists with whom we have disagreed than we do with Presbyterians, Episcopalians or Jews.

So, the fact that a Samaritan village does not welcome Jesus on his way to Jerusalem probably does not surprise him, but this is not the last we will hear about Samaritans from Luke. In a couple weeks we will read Jesus' parable recorded in Luke 10 about a Samaritan who is a model of neighborly love. And in the eighth chapter of Acts, Luke's second volume, it is said that Philip proclaims the good news of the Messiah to Samaritans, and they accept the word of God. So, what happens in our story is that these Samaritans are given another chance. They are not told that they are part of the kingdom of God at this point. They are just not judged. They are given time to come to faith.

The people who do not meet Jesus' urgent demands have this same opportunity, this same measure of grace, even though it is not emphasized,

and so do we. It is never too late to welcome Christ and chose to follow him, even though there was a Gospel song I heard growing up entitled “One Day Too Late.” But God in Christ always extends grace to us. God gives us an endless supply of second chances. This is the message in the first half of the story.

Yet there is another message in this part of the story. The call to discipleship is urgent and demanding, but not only is grace always available; our focus is to be on our path, not anyone else’s. The disciples’ misstep in regard to the Samaritans is not just that they don’t understand Jesus’ desire to give them another chance. It’s that they think they are worthy to judge the Samaritans. They are not. Judgment belongs to God and God alone, period; no ifs, ands or buts!

We know this, but it is difficult to keep our focus on our path, demanding though it is, perhaps because it is. It is tempting when we struggle to point out the flaws of others, but it is never a wise path. How many times has someone who has condemned the supposed immorality of others been caught in a more serious transgression? Consider what is happening in the Southern Baptist Convention. I seem to remember that Jesus said something about taking the log out of our own eye before pointing out the speck in our neighbor’s. “Judge not,” he said, “so that you may not be judged (Matthew 7:1–5).” We need to focus on our path.

So, is Jesus playing good cop, bad cop in this story? It may appear that he is blowing hot and cold, but he is consistent in his yearning for people to follow him on a path of sacrificial love, and he is equally consistent in his willingness to extend grace to those who try to do so because he knows how difficult the path is, yet also how rewarding it is. May God grant us courage to remain on the path in the light of all the grace we have received and continue to receive each and every day!