

# Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

## FACING JESUS

Luke 9:51-62

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### Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

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. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, 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. 56 Then they went on to another village. 57 As 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, first let me go and bury my father." 60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 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 a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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## DIAGNOSIS: Facing God through the Traditions of the Law

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Conflicting Views on What God Demands*

In the history of Israel, "Jerusalem" and "Samaria" came to represent two conflicting viewpoints about *where* God said he should be worshiped and *where* his blessing would be given. Samaritans (Israelites of the Samaritan Tradition, represented by the Samaritan villagers in this text) thought that the worship and blessing of God as prescribed by the Torah was fulfilled by facing Mount Gerizim. The Jews (Israelites from the Jerusalem Tradition, represented here by Jesus' own advance team, James and John, the likes of you and me) thought that facing Mount Zion was what God commanded because that was the place given to them by divine conquest. While these two traditions disagreed on *where* God should be faced, they nevertheless agreed on *how* he should be faced. Through his law: those who keep it will be blessed; those who don't will be cursed. Even so, even in spite of this formal agreement on the law as God's demand on us, they nevertheless differed on the specifics of what that law required: for Samaritans it required facing Mount Gerizim; for Judaeans Mount Zion. Therefore, each thought of themselves as right, the other wrong, and the conflict irreconcilable. The Samaritans refused to "receive" Judeans and Judeans were eager to "command fire" to rain down upon the Samaritans. Sound familiar?

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Arrogance before God*

The inward counterpart to this outward conflict is not righteousness, as James and John, the likes of us, might suppose, but arrogance. This arrogance is indicated by James and John's matter-of-fact question to Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Such a request to exercise this kind of lawful judgment can have only one source: arrogant hearts banking on the assumption or presumption that they actually fulfill that law and are authorized/justified to wield the divine wrath. To be

sure, the Samaritans also harbor this same kind of arrogance. But that's the point. The outward conflict between them is nothing more than a façade giving cover to their inward arrogance –arrogance masquerading as righteousness before God.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Rebuked***

To be sure, the reason we know that James and John's request emerges out of arrogance and not righteousness is that Jesus rebukes them. What is startling about this rebuke is its abruptness. Luke says in matter of fact fashion that Jesus "...turned and rebuked them. Then they went on their way" (vv. 55-56). No long haranguing... No in depth explanation... Just a simple rebuke and all is done. In a sense, that rebuke was like death. It comes quickly... by surprise; it stops whatever is going on ... leaving no explanation behind. To be sure, the Samaritans were as deserving of this rebuke as were James and John, the likes of you and me. But they didn't get the rebuke—not yet anyway. To be sure, they will, if not from Jesus, then from the very God whom they claim to worship aright on Mount Gerizim. For neither the Jerusalem tradition nor the Gerizim tradition of law worships a God who will tolerate an arrogant heart for long. That much law both traditions have in common, as exhibited by their mutual condemnations of each other.

## **PROGNOSIS: Facing God in the Face of Jesus**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Setting His Face to Go to Jerusalem***

How fortunate it is for James and John that their rebuke came from Jesus. Not because Jesus' rebuke is any less law-like or any less deadly than the rebukes of the Jerusalem or Gerizim traditions, but because that rebuke is not Jesus' last or primary Word for them—or us. In a sense, the word of rebuke Jesus speaks is not really his Word at all. It's the law's word, which Jesus agrees is true, but which he is also determined to

rebuke, to override, to put to an end. And that is why he has “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (v. 51). He goes there not to advance the Jerusalem tradition of law over against the Gerizim tradition of law. No. He goes there to rebuke the Word of law categorically, regardless of the traditional form it takes. This he does in a most unusual fashion by “being taken up” (*analepseos*, v. 51), as Luke describes it, which is his word for Jesus’ great work of being crucified, raised and ascended—his “being taken up” on the cross to die, his “being taken up” from death to new life, his “being taken up” from new life to reign with mercy and forgiveness. On the cross, Christ endures the rebuke of the law as it comes from arrogant hearts of all traditions (Jerusalem, Roman, and Gerizim) in order to rebuke its rebukes with his alternative Word. No episode in Luke’s gospel more clearly portrays this dynamic duel than the two thieves on the cross (23:39-43). With rebukes flying all around him from mocking soldiers to jeering spectators to wagging heads and deriding criminals, Jesus counters them by rebuking the rebukes: “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (23:43); “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing (v. 34). This is not a continuation of the Jerusalem tradition of law or any other tradition of law. It is the end of it.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Faith as Being Taken up by Jesus**

In the face of Jesus, God rebukes his ever present (lawful) rebuke of sinners, not because they deserve that gracious rebuke but because he wants to give it. And as our faces are drawn by the power of Spirit to behold him who is “taken up” for us, we, too, become “taken up” by him. This, in the language of Luke, is faith. While this particular text is very sparse on this theme, Luke’s Gospel as a whole is punctuated with it. Suffice it say for now that, in this text, faith is that unfathomable trust in Jesus that makes it possible for Luke to say of James and John,

after they received the rebuke of Jesus, that “they [Jesus and the rebuked disciples] went on to another village” (v. 56). That is they followed Jesus, trusting that his rebuke of their arrogance is trumped by his rebuke of the rebuke, what we call forgiveness. In Luke’s mind, faith is discipleship; to follow is to trust.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Afflicted but Not Conflicted***

So what might this faith look like outwardly in the lives of those who follow Jesus? In a sense that’s what verses 57-62 of our text are getting at in a very terse and enigmatic way. Following Jesus is not easy, if measured by the comforts of the world. It offers no assurances of having the comforts of home (v. 58); it has as its focus not “burying the dead” (i.e., attending to the demands of the law) but “proclaiming the kingdom of God” (i.e., tending to the hope of the resurrection); it calls us to find our identity not in where we came from (our family ties) but in where we are going, the Kingdom of God. The life of the disciple will be filled with all kinds of “affliction” as the Spirit redirects their focus away from the concerns of this world to the Kingdom of God. But it will not incite “conflict.” It will not ask “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (v. 54). The answer to that question is clearly “No.” Rather, it will say, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34; cf. Acts 7:60). The key concept in this week’s Epistle reading for describing the Christian life is “freedom,” not in the sense of aimlessness but in the sense of being guided by the Spirit as opposed to the law (Gal. 5:1, 13-25). You might want to fold this insight of Paul’s into the mix here.