

[Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#)

[Psalm 77:11-20](#)

[Galatians 5:1, 13-25](#)

[Luke 9:46-62](#)

Sermon for June 26, 2022

THE TOLERANCE OF FAITH

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Summary: For freedom, Christ has set us free.

In the gospel accounts of our Lord's life, the writers – especially the writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke – often drew for one of their sources upon collections of the sayings of Jesus, either written or oral. Then in writing their accounts, the authors would group several of these sayings together because they all seemed to have the same general topic and present them as if they had been spoken by Jesus on a single occasion, usually one right after the other, with no context or explanatory material provided.

Our Gospel reading for today from Luke provides a good example of this methodology. It really has two sections, each dealing with a separate topic, and each of those sections in turn has three short sayings or illustrations which Jesus undoubtedly provided on some occasion or other, and which Luke has brought together for the purpose of narrative flow and to lay out Jesus' instruction for the reader.

The first section runs from verse 46 to 56, and to put it in the most general terms, the topic of the three illustrations in this section is prideful intolerance. Let's read it together.

vv. 46-56. 46 Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest.

47 And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, 48 and said to them, "Whoever receives this little child in My name

receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.”

49 Now John answered and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.”

50 But Jesus said to him, “Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side.”

51 Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, 52 and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. 53 But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. 54 And 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, just as Elijah did?”

55 But He turned and rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what manner 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 to another village.

The second section runs from 57-62, and the topic here has to do with the special sacrifices involved in being a committed follower of Christ.

vv. 57-62.

57 Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, “Lord, 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 Then He said to another, “Follow Me.”

But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

60 Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”

61 And another also said, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.”

62 But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

On the face of it, these two sections seem to have entirely different subject matters, and that's my way of reading them as well, though obviously others of greater ingenuity might find some commonality. But in my way of reading them, Luke has simply brought together various things Jesus is recorded to have said on different

occasions to clarify and communicate to the readership his Lord's instruction on these separate topics.

In any event, right or wrong, that's what we'll assume today, and since we only have a limited amount of time, we'll focus on the first of these two topics, which I suggested earlier is the topic of prideful intolerance.

The first illustration Luke provides is of an occasion in which there was some sort of dispute between or among some of the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. Although they differ to some degree in the specifics, all the gospel writers make mention of such an incident, so it must have been well-known among the early Christian family, and the other accounts make it clearer than Luke does that the dispute was about which of the disciples was to be of greater authority, to have a higher rank, so to say, in the administrative hierarchy of Christ's kingdom.

And it is that desire for authority over each other that Jesus rebukes, and for which he then offers a child as his model of the attitude he seeks for his followers.

Why does Luke put this one first in his three illustrations of the dangers of intolerance? I think he was pointing out that the very first thing we must learn if we are to become followers of Christ is exactly that: that we are all his followers.

You'll remember the episode that Matthew recounts for us of the occasion when a Roman centurion appeals to Jesus for help in healing his servant, and addresses Jesus in this very remarkable way, saying:

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me.”

The centurion had recognized that Jesus himself was acting under a higher and all-powerful authority, a fact that Jesus himself emphasizes again and again during his ministry. In John's gospel, in fact, you can count forty-four separate occasions when Jesus says, in effect, the things I do and say are reflections of my Father's will, I'm simply following his instructions, carrying out His assignment. In the garden of Gethsemane, the final words of his final prayer to his father are these: *Not my will, but thine be done.*

All of us proud independent types have an attitude towards the world summed up by saying: Nobody tells me what to do! But the very first movement of the

Christian life is the acceptance of the fact that yes, indeed, somebody can tell you what to do, and that somebody is Jesus.

St. Paul learned this lesson well, and passed it on to the Galatians: “*..and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God...*”

What Paul learned, and what we all must learn from the very beginning, is the lesson Jesus was illustrating by bringing a little child and offering it to his disciples as a model. As we all know, I'm not a particular fan of children, but even I must allow that they have certain charms, at least the little ones, and that among those charms is a lack of pride when it comes to dealing with other little children, and a natural and unquestioning acceptance of the authority of their parents.

That very attitude, in its adult version, is the attitude Jesus asks of his own followers, and asks of us. The only true authority we have in life is the authority to speak and act on behalf of Christ. We must never regard ourselves as leaders of men and women, but only and always as followers of Jesus.

And Luke immediately follows that first and fundamental instruction by telling us of another occasion when John tells Jesus that the disciples had come across someone else professing to preach in Christ's name, but who wasn't one of their circle of followers. Jesus tells them sharply to let the man alone.

If the first illustration was about the prideful intolerance of accepting Christ as the sole authority, this one is about the prideful intolerance of different ways of serving Christ. Paul again proves himself to be a good student of this instruction, when he elaborates on it in his letter to the Corinthians:

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 10 to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,[a] and to still another the interpretation of tongues.[b] 11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (12)

This sort of intolerance is familiar to all of us in ordinary life, isn't it? Even where we all share a laudable commitment to the same thing – racial equity, say, or the

desire for justice, or the elimination of poverty – there is a terrible tendency in human nature to assume that one's own opinion about how to accomplish those laudable goals is the best, perhaps even the only possible acceptable opinion, sometimes even to the point of silencing or canceling those whose opinions differ from our own. “My way or the highway” becomes our motto, and the end result is at best a fruitless deadlock and at worst a social tyranny where one point of view also has the reins of power and the means of forcibly silencing those in disagreement. The history of both the Christian church and society in general offers countless examples of the terrible, often tragic, results that are the invariable outcome of this sort of prideful intolerance disguised as moral certainty.

But to move on. The third illustration Luke provides gives us an example of this kind of intolerance carried to its most extreme. The hostile Samaritans refuse hospitality to our little band of pilgrims, and two of them, outraged, demand their destruction, a demand that Jesus refuses and in fact impatiently rebukes.

Near the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln perfectly captures the essence of the Christian response to the disagreement that Jesus is pointing at in this illustration, when in a famous speech, he asked the rhetorical question: “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”

The kingdom of heaven is not one in which disagreements are eliminated by the imposition of one opinion or point of view from above, but rather by the spread of mutual love and respect into the underlying foundation of all human affairs, a slow, often painfully slow process that Jesus, on another occasions, likens to the spread of a little yeast throughout a large body of dough. True and lasting heavenly peace, rather than its brittle and transitory human caricature, must await the spread of Christ's own Spirit of tolerant love throughout the entirety of our Father's creation.

But lest we despair of the slow pace of that accomplishment with regard to creation as a whole, let us conclude by reminding ourselves that Christ's instructions are always offered first and foremost, to each of us as individuals. Jesus is the great physician of souls, not the great physician of societies. His primary object is not to reconcile *humanity* to God, it's to reconcile each one of us to God. Unless he comes again soon, none of us will live to the world restored to universal spiritual health. But each of us individually has the instruction we need, and through his indwelling spirit, the power we need, to incorporate his instruction into our own lives.

When Jesus rebukes his disciples, John and James, because of their desire to destroy their enemies, he's not doing so to profit their enemies, he's doing so to

profit James and John. When he tells his disciples to let others seek their own way of following the Son of Man, his concern is for the disciples themselves, and for the harm they are doing to their own spirits by their arrogance and sense of special privilege and special knowledge. And when he chastises them for seeking preeminence over others, he's reminding them that God loves us all with the infinite love of a divine parent, and that our true and heavenly spiritual health depends on focusing on our shared status as children of God, rather than on all our incidental differences.

And so our prayer for today is that we may outgrow our prideful intolerance of others, and find personal and heavenly peace in accepting the boundless love of our heavenly Father by following the instruction of His heavenly Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.