

**Luke 9:51-56**  
**The Wrong Perspective**

People sometimes have the wrong perspective of God. This is especially true when bad things happen. People can forget that God is all-powerful, loving, and gracious, and instead think of God as vengeful, capricious, and mean-spirited. People can think He is out to get them, or at the very least unwilling to become involved.

While it is not possible to separate the different attributes of God from one another, it is true that God is merciful. He is never cruel or vicious, never selfish or malicious. While He is perfectly holy, righteous, and just, He is also forgiving and gracious. The perfect balance of His love and justice is beyond our comprehension, but we can nevertheless affirm, in all circumstances and situations, that for children of God, He is on our side.

God has always been for His people. For example, despite Israel's sin, God was merciful,  
    <sup>7</sup>I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord,  
    According to all that the Lord has granted us,  
    And the great goodness toward the house of Israel,  
    Which He has granted them according to His compassion  
    And according to the abundance of His lovingkindnesses.  
<sup>8</sup>For He said, "Surely, they are My people,  
    Sons who will not deal falsely."  
    So He became their Savior.  
<sup>9</sup>In all their affliction He was afflicted,  
    And the angel of His presence saved them;  
    In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them,  
    And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:7-9).

The psalmist praised God for His mercy,  
    "But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,  
    Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (Psalm 86:15).

In the New Testament, Paul recognized God's mercy. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3) he wrote to a very dysfunctional church. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews appreciated the advantages of a merciful Savior as well, "therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17).

Today, we also are called to be merciful. It is one of the attributes of God to which we can aspire. But more than merely a goal, to be merciful is a command to the followers of Jesus, "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Mercy can be defined as an act of unconditional love towards another simply because of their need. It is unrelated to whether or not the person is deserving. Keeping in context Jesus' recent teaching to the disciples regarding who might be greatest in the kingdom of God to come, we can appreciate that it takes great humility to be merciful.

### **Context**

Luke is, as usual, not specific when it comes to chronology. "When the days" (v. 51) is indefinite, but the context would suggest that it was not too long following the recent conversations about the sins of pride and prejudice among the disciples. But these "days" are significant.

Until now Luke has focused on the details of the coming of Jesus - His birth, the ministry of John the Baptist, His baptism, His temptation, and the first two and one-half years of ministry, mainly in Galilee. We have seen Jesus heal, feed, exorcise demons, and raise the dead. Some of the disciples had seen a preview of the glorious kingdom to come when they witnessed the Transfiguration. All of them had heard His teaching and seen Him refute the Pharisees. Now, Luke's account turns itself toward Jerusalem. Attention has shifted from the *coming* of the Messiah to His *leaving*. While there were still months of ministry ahead for Jesus, especially in Judea, Jesus is headed toward the cross.

Much of the material in the next several chapters (chapters 9:51-19:27) is unique to Luke. His account no longer parallels Matthew and Mark (and though John has material on the Judean ministry, that gospel was written after Luke wrote his). The theme seems to be a continuation of what Jesus had said to His disciples after the Transfiguration, "let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44).

The journey from Galilee to Judea was not a long one. It could have been accomplished in a matter of a few days. Yet Jesus took months before He arrived at His final destination. During this time He ministered not so much to the crowds, but personally to His disciples. Yet we cannot think that His delay was due to fear or a reluctance to fulfill His mission. Jesus steadfastly set His face toward Jerusalem. He was determined. His resolve strengthened His steps. He was not hesitant. He did not waver. He knew what was coming - betrayal, scourging, crucifixion, death and yet "He was determined to go to Jerusalem" (v. 51).

### **Purpose**

"The days were approaching" (v. 51). The word means "to be fulfilled" and suggests the irrevocability of God's ultimate plan for redemption. Everything happened according to this sovereign plan.

Jesus was fully aware of the plan, "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day" (9:22).

His will was in accord with the plan, "and He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.'" (Matthew 26:39).

His timetable on earth was according to the plan, "<sup>31</sup>Just at that time some Pharisees approached, saying to Him, 'Go away, leave here, for Herod wants to kill You.' <sup>32</sup>And He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My

goal.”<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside of Jerusalem” (Luke 13:31-33).

Jesus knew it would fulfill Scripture (Matthew 26:52-54), “<sup>52</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. <sup>53</sup>Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? <sup>54</sup>How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?”

Writing a generation after the fact, Luke recognized that the climax was not the crucifixion but the ascension. Though some insist that the term refers to Jesus being lifted up on the cross, the only other time the word is used is in Acts 1, and there it refers to Jesus’ ascension into heaven. This was the ultimate end for which Jesus had come. “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” (Hebrews 12:2).

### Mercy

A key theme of Luke’s gospel is that Jesus came to be the redeemer of more than only the Jewish people. He was a universal Savior. Luke was a Gentile, and he was writing to a Gentile (Theophilus). But more than this, Jesus was specifically a Savior to those most outcast from society. He did not preach to kings and emperors but spent His time in encounters with women of questionable character, lepers, the demon-possessed, and tax collectors. Jesus had come to be a Savior for all people - and all kinds of people.

Even in his genealogy, Luke begins not as Matthew does with Abraham, but rather with the father of the human race, Adam.



Jesus taught the disciples this truth even by the route He chose to go to Judea. Most Jews, and certainly all rabbis, would travel from Galilee to Judea by crossing the Jordan River and passing through Perea. They would then recross the river and enter Judea through Jericho. If they must travel through Samaria, they carried their own food, as they could not eat food defiled by the unclean Samaritans.

This antipathy had a very long and deep history. It began with the conquest of the ten northern tribes of Israel by Assyria in 732 BC. “<sup>22</sup>The sons of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them <sup>23</sup>until the Lord removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day. <sup>24</sup>The king of Assyria brought men from Babylon and from Cuthah and from Avva and from Hamath and

Sepharvaim, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel. So they possessed Samaria and lived in its cities” (2 Kings 17:22-24).

These gentiles then mixed in with, and intermarried, the Jews who had not been deported following the conquest. The resulting people group took its name from the capital city of the region and introduced their own gods, “but every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria had made, every nation in their cities in which they lived” (2 Kings 17:29). Eventually this syncretism resulted in the Samaritan people worshipping Yahweh, but only accepting the Pentateuch as canonical and worshipping on Mount Gerizim rather than at Jerusalem. This was the context for Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, “<sup>19</sup>the woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship’” (John 4:19-20).

When the Jews returned from exile, under the leadership of Zerubbabel they began to rebuild the temple. This led to further conflict when the Samaritans tried to help, “<sup>1</sup>now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the Lord God of Israel, <sup>2</sup>they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ households, and said to them, ‘let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.’ <sup>3</sup>But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers’ households of Israel said to them, ‘you have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us’” (Ezra 4:1-3). Consequently, the Samaritans built their own temple where they worshipped on Mount Gerizim beginning in about 400 BC.

During the intertestamental period, relations did not improve. In c.120 BC the Maccabean leader John Hyrcanus conquered Samaria and destroyed this temple and put the inhabitants of the region into slavery. In the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (written during this time) it states that “<sup>25</sup>there are two nations that my soul detests, the third is not a nation at all: <sup>26</sup>the inhabitants of Mount Seir, the Philistines, and the stupid people living at Shechem” (Ecclesiasticus 50:25-26). By the time of Christ, relations had deteriorated even further, so much so in fact that one of the worst accusations the Pharisees could make against Jesus was to call Him a Samaritan, “the Jews answered and said to Him, ‘do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?’” (John 8:48).

It is ironic that Jesus would go to a place where the self-righteous Pharisees would not. Still, go there He did. He needed to make prior arrangements because any normal host would require advanced warning of they were to provide food and shelter to thirteen men. It would be difficult to accommodate them if they simply showed up at the doorstep of a home or even an inn. So, “He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him” (v. 52).

It probably came as no surprise to Jesus that “they did not receive Him” (v. 53). And the reason given was in line with contemporary understanding of the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. They refused to welcome Jesus not because of anything personal, nor because of anything He had said or done. It was simply because “He was traveling toward Jerusalem” (v. 53). He was on His way to Jerusalem, presumably to worship, and since the Samaritans believed God should only be worshipped on Mount

Gerizim, they refused to give him food and shelter. Their temple had been destroyed by Jews, so they had no reason to offer assistance to a Jew going to a different place to worship. They would have nothing to do with assisting Jesus and His disciples on their way.

While Jesus may not have been surprised at the response of the Samaritans, and perhaps even disappointed, His disciples were indignant. One can imagine James and John rushing up to Jesus to inform Him of the insult He had been offered. So offended were they, that James and John asked Jesus if He wanted them to send a clear message to these Samaritans showing them what happened to those who did not honor the Messiah, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (v. 54).

The disciples had recently seen Elijah in the Transfiguration, and perhaps they recalled his dealings with King Ahaziah of Israel. After Ahaziah had injured himself in a fall, he had sent his men to ask Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, for assistance. Meeting them on their way, Elijah told them that for his lack of faith in the God of Israel, Ahaziah would die. When he heard this news Ahaziah sent his men to bring Elijah before him. When the men came to take him, Elijah called down fire from heaven that destroyed them (2 Kings 1:16). James and John thought the same treatment was called for on this occasion.

Clearly, James and John had zeal for Christ. Furthermore their zeal was properly motivated. In fact, it also was biblically based. Yet, they were still wrong. Circumstances change. What may have been right for Elijah might not be right always. We can learn from this that it is possible to mean well, to have good intentions, and even biblical precedent, and still be wrong.

We can only imagine what went through Jesus’ mind as He heard this. Did He roll His eyes in frustration? Did He wryly smile at their foolishness? We do not know what He thought, but we do know what He said. He rebuked the disciples immediately and without reservation. He said, “<sup>55</sup>you do not know what kind of spirit you are of; <sup>56</sup>for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (v. 55-56). These words are not in the earliest manuscripts we have, and may have been added by a scribe using texts now lost to clarify the words of Jesus. But that does not mean they are not inspired. Indeed, they are in perfect harmony with what Jesus taught throughout His ministry.

John 3:17, “ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

John 12:47, “If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.”

Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

What the disciples lacked was mercy. The people of that Samaritan village had not rejected Jesus because they doubted His claims to be the Messiah, or because they did not believe His teaching. They did not know Him. They had never met Him. They simply rejected Him because He was a Jew. They were given mercy because they were ignorant of what they were doing. Jesus gave them mercy that they might, in time, come to believe. After all, as Jesus reminded His disciples, “it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.” (Matthew 18:14).

There will be a time for judgment. Jesus promised this. Later, when Jesus again sent out His disciples, He would instruct them, “<sup>10</sup>but whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, <sup>11</sup>even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’ <sup>12</sup>I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than for that city” (Luke 10:10-12).

But this was not the time for judgment. Instead, Jesus and His disciples merely “went on to another village” (v. 56). History teaches us much about the errors of the Church in this area. In Church history, mercy is too often overlooked. Too often Church leaders have pronounced judgment based on biblical beliefs and a zeal for Christ that was unmerciful. The Crusades, Inquisition, persecution of Jews and Anabaptists during the Reformation, and the constant religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in the 17th century all come to mind.

After Pentecost, the disciples went about preaching the kingdom of God. Eventually “<sup>5</sup>Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. <sup>6</sup>The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. <sup>7</sup>For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. <sup>8</sup>So there was much rejoicing in that city” (Acts 8:5-8). That Jesus had been merciful and restrained the wishes of James and John perhaps allowed some in Samaria to come to faith in Christ.

No doubt the Church is called to confront sin among its members and evangelize the lost. But the final judgment belongs to God. The lesson of the wheat and tares of Matthew 13:24-27 is that the Church is not a perfect body, “<sup>24</sup>Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup>But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup>But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.” Sin is amongst us and should be dealt with, but dealt with as mercifully as we can possibly allow.

### **Take Aways**

Let us remember that Jesus came not as an adversary, but as a Savior. He has ever been merciful to us, and so we should be to others.