

[Luke 9:51-62](#)

What should we do when people say 'No' to Jesus? Or maybe they don't say a clear-cut 'Yes'?

It's a question that troubles many Christians. Sometimes that is because the person saying 'No' is a loved one.

Our reading from Luke today deals with that issue. Both parts of the reading are relevant to this question, both the Samaritan villages that do not welcome the disciples, and the three people who in Jesus' eyes display inadequate commitment. Each of the two parts says something distinctive about how we respond.

Part 1: Judgement Is Above Our Pay Grade

As Jesus sets out for Jerusalem, he sends messengers ahead of him, but despite this in one Samaritan village they do not welcome him (verses 51-53). Imagine civil servants and royal equerries being sent to a town ahead of a visit by the Queen, doing all the donkey work, then the Queen arrives and people throw bad eggs and rotten tomatoes at her. It's a bit like that.

You can understand James and John asking Jesus, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' (Verse 54)

You can understand their reaction all the more when you remember that elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus had a nickname for those two. In Mark 3:17, he called them 'sons of thunder.' What does that say about them? Were they like first century Hell's Angels, riding into the village in their leathers and on their Harley Davidsons? Were they more like punks, spitting at people they didn't like? It's not a flattering nickname, and a desire to call down fire from heaven on an unwelcoming village seems perfectly in step with the name.

So if you thought of John as the gentle apostle who wrote about love, think how much he was transformed over the years!

And surely to reject Jesus is to reject salvation? So isn't judgement the natural corollary? Wasn't there a logic to what James and John suggested?

Perhaps we can identify with them more than we might easily admit. Think of a time when you were rejected. Did you have unworthy thoughts inside you about the people who did that to you?

Or remember a time when one of your children was treated badly by someone. What did you want to do to the perpetrator? You might not have said it out loud, but somewhere inside you there was probably a rage against that person, and you began to imagine what you would like to do to that person if you have the guts and if you thought you could get away with it.

I will confess to you that I am like that. You may have me down as a placid character, but don't anyone dare mess with my children, even though one is now an adult and the other will be in a matter of weeks. I sometimes think I could write the script of an 18-rated film if I followed all my darkest imaginings.

But Jesus rebukes them (verse 55) and he and the disciples move on to another village (verse 56). We don't know what Jesus says in his rebuke, but we can probably infer.

We know that Jesus spoke clearly about God's judgement at the end of time. If I recall correctly, all but two references to Hell as a consequence of judgement in the Bible are on the lips of Jesus. He didn't mince his words. Yet he didn't endorse what James and John said. Instead, he moved his disciples on elsewhere.

I think the inference is very clear. We may indeed be upset, but let us leave judgement to God and move on. This is not a way of making excuses for people, but it is to say that judgement in the hands of God will be righteous and holy. In our hands it is imperfect at best, and at its worst descends into naked revenge.

Think for a moment: we know that God is holy and God is loving. What better character could there be to exercise judgement than the One who perfectly embodies those qualities? Do we measure up? No.

When someone we know rejects Jesus, or rejects us because of Jesus, then we leave the judgement to God. We pray a prayer of relinquishment, handing them over to God, who is best placed to deal with them in righteousness and love. 'Lord,' we say, 'will you please deal with this person? You will do what is wisest and best.'

And then, like Jesus with his disciples, we move on. We may or may not move on geographically, we may simply move on emotionally. But to move on is healthy. Leave the situation behind with God. He knows best what to do so

that person might find him, or if their heart has become hardened towards him.

So concentrate on someone or something else. There are so many people who need to come into contact with the love of God, and he uses us to do that. He may have a new challenge for us.

Part 2: Don't Lower Your Standards

When we get on to the brief exchanges Jesus has with three people who apparently do want to be his followers but whose offers he does not take up (verses 57-62) it's important to remember that Jesus often teaches by saying extreme things to make a point. In English we call this 'hyperbole', and it was very common in Jewish teachers.

So when he tells the first enquirer that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (verse 58) he is making a big, cartoon-like statement to make that person realise that following him risks involving considerable inconvenience and discomfort. Don't come this way if you just want life's creature comforts, says Jesus.

And when we look at the life of someone like the Apostle Paul, we see someone for whom that was profoundly true. Paul talked about physical danger, imprisonment, threats to his life, being stranded at sea, sleeplessness, hunger, and thirst all in one passage, for example (2 Corinthians 11:23ff). It's not exactly the way to the good life as is commonly conceived by people today!

If you follow me, says Jesus, you're not signing up for an easy life.

Then when the second person wants to bury his father, Jesus says that the man cannot put social norms and expectations above following him. The man can't have been talking about the actual burial of his father, because that happened within twenty-four hours of the death. This was necessary in a hot climate, and to this day Jews and Muslims bury their dead much quicker than we do.

So the only burial the man can be thinking of is what happened later when the bones of the deceased were transferred from their own grave to a communal ossuary in the village. There was no requirement in the laws of Moses for a son to do this, it was a matter of social custom. Jesus says you can't elevate that over following him. He is Lord.

The third person makes what also sounds like a reasonable request, to say goodbye to his family, but Jesus' response about not looking back when you have put your hand to the plough (which was a well-known ancient proverb) indicates that Jesus thought this person was easily distracted from the cause of God's kingdom. And you can't do that. You can't be half-hearted. You can't say, well I'll come to church when I feel like it. Or, I'll do what Jesus wants when it doesn't get in the way of what I want to do.

I want to suggest to you that Jesus' approach is the opposite of what we typically say today. We are so desperate about our declining and aging numbers that we say Jesus welcomes all, but we drop the obligations that Jesus puts on disciples.

But here's the paradox: the grace of God is free, but it costs us all we have. A church that preaches free grace but not discipleship is not preaching the Gospel.

Hear it again: the grace of God is free, but it costs us all we have.

John Wesley knew this, and he structured the early Methodists accordingly. We have heard a lot about the small groups he set up, but he set up more than one kind of group, and they had different purposes. So the class meeting was the one open to all, including those enquiring after the faith – or, as Wesley put it, 'Those who desire to flee from the wrath to come.'

But the band meeting was for those who were seriously committed to Christ. In the band meeting members held one another accountable for their Christian lives each week. They did so in a confidential relationship. Even to this day Methodist ministers will sometimes say to each other, 'I want to speak in band.' This means they want to speak confidentially.

When someone is unwilling to accept Jesus' challenging standards for discipleship, it is the wrong response to lower the bar. Jesus never did that. When the rich young ruler walked away, Jesus didn't chase him and say, I didn't really mean you had to give up all your possessions. Just ten per cent will do.'

When people are reluctant to follow Jesus, yes of course we remember that God's grace is freely offered to all, but we must also remember it will cost us everything.

If someone says no to that, we leave the judgement to God and we move on.