

Focused and Intense **Luke 9:51 – 10:24**

About twenty years ago, I was studying the Bible with a young man who had gone to church all his life, but, despite listening attentively to all the classes and sermons, he really did not know what was in the book. One of the books we went through was Acts. We read it like a novel. I filled in the relevant geography and history. At the end, I asked, “So, what did you think?” He answered, “Those people were intense.”

I had never thought of the characters in the Bible as “intense.” My mental image had the various Bible characters being even-tempered, calm, spouting pithy lines that exactly fit the need of the moment. So, I had to rethink my mental images.

The next section of Luke, in my rewritten mental screenplay, fits that “intense” description. Jesus was focused and intense. So, of course, those whom Jesus influenced adopted some of that. The first scene in this section depicts the disciples going a little overboard.

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?” ⁵⁵ But He turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.

As in the previous section, and again later in this section, Jesus sent out representatives to stir up expectations for Jesus visiting that place. This was an agricultural society, so most people spent the day in the fields. Without advance warning, they would not even know that Jesus was in town until the end of the day.

One of the required festivals was coming, probably Tabernacles in the early fall. As usual, Jesus and his disciples took the direct route from Galilee to Jerusalem, through Samaria, whereas many circumvented the necessity of dealing with that hated ethnic group by going well out of their way, crossing the Jordan twice and passing down the eastern side, which was also Gentile territory, but there were some Jewish villages, and those Gentiles were not quite so much hated as the Samaritans.

I presume that James and John were confident that they could actually call down fire from heaven on that Samaritan village. They were intense – but overly so. Ethnic hatred and the good news of the eternal Kingdom just do not go together.

To what religious cultural expectations do we fall prey? We live in a very special part of the country. As long as you stay out of the metropolitan areas, people are generally nice and reasonably moral and ethical. So, we are accustomed to a certain level of behavior. How do we react when we interact with people from different cultures who have radically different beliefs? We might call it culture shock. Those cultural differences may be huge, like the way the disciples and the Samaritans treated each other. But, for example, inviting people to an event, like a religious gathering built around our culture, is just as shocking to them as it is comfortable for us. In our reaction to the differences, we miss the point of our commonalities: building a family, understanding God, understanding life.

We need to be able to connect with people of other cultures. Have you thought about trying to spread the gospel in a Muslim neighborhood in this country, let alone in an Islamic country? Sharon and I have dealt with people who had great difficulty getting past ancestor worship and juju – some of them even

church leaders in West Africa. As demonstrated in this scene, success is not found in threats and conflict, just evidence.

In the next scene, the focus shifts back to Jesus and His interactions with various individuals who either volunteered or were asked by Jesus to join their little traveling band. Something we often overlook – not everyone who volunteered for service was accepted, and not everyone to whom Jesus said, “Follow Me,” did. In this next scene, Jesus reveals His intensity and His expectations.

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.”

That line, “First let me go and bury my father,” certainly did not mean that his father had just died. Jewish custom was that they got the deceased into a tomb before sundown, so this man certainly had not gone off to talk with Jesus within hours after his father’s death but before his burial. Rather, the request was to put off joining the group until after his father passed, which could be years. The part about, “Let the dead bury their own dead,” was not harsh but just exposing his excuse. Certainly, there were enough family members who did not care all that much about God to take care of the burial arrangements when that time came. Similarly, the line about, “Let me go and bid my family farewell,” according to the custom of the time, would routinely take at least a week. Travel was slow. Joining a trade caravan, for example, consuming a year or two was common. So, saying goodbye was a long process. Jesus’ point was that these were excuses, not reasons. To each person, Jesus wanted them to come to grips with the depth of commitment that would be required.

Do we make sure that interested parties hear the uncomfortable parts of the gospel, too? Do we talk about being living sacrifices, that we are reserved for godly purposes, that we operate within a miraculous unity, that we are expected to talk about the gospel to others, and that we are expected to share? Or, are we afraid that we will scare them off? Unfortunately, many appeal to outsiders not only with a self-centered gospel, appealing to them with what’s in it for them, but also we shy away from the depth of commitment that God expects. As a small illustration we experienced in Cameroon from a Cameroonian preacher in his Sunday sermon, “Whom do you trust? The God in heaven or the god behind the house?” In Cameroon, idolatry is a deeply ingrained part of the culture. Renouncing it causes terrible repercussions from family and neighbors. So, for the sake of keeping up the numbers, most churches don’t talk about it, and most church-goers occasionally sacrifice a chicken on the altar behind the house just in case. That’s an easy one for us to see the problem because sacrificing on pagan altars is not something we encounter. But what about features of Christianity that run up against some of the common practices of our time, like divorce, or cheating on your taxes, or failing to keep your word?

Moving along to the next scene as they traveled toward Jerusalem, Jesus sent out another group of advance advertisers, but 70 this time instead of 12, probably because they were into Judea, which was much more densely populated. The instructions were the same, so I’m going to skip that part and drop down to verse 13 where Jesus relates to the group before they go out that the miracles that they perform on this tour should make the message of the Kingdom utterly obvious. But, as we know, the vast majority of the hearers were not moved to action

¹³ *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! [both of which are at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, two of the towns that they had gone through on the first tour in chapter 9.] For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴ But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. ¹⁵ And you, Capernaum [same general vicinity], who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades. ¹⁶ He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.”*

This “good news of the kingdom” preached both by John the Baptist and by Jesus was utterly obvious. The miracles that were performed in all the cities of the north, and soon in the south, were irrefutable evidence. They were not selling complex theology or slick legal briefs. They spoke simply and proved through their healings and exorcisms that they spoke for God. Tyre and Sidon, two main seaports in what we call Lebanon, although Tyre had been destroyed by Alexander the Great some three or four centuries earlier. Still, Tyre was representative of the greatness that had been Phoenicia. Jesus said, “If those miracles had been done there, those Lebanese would have responded.

Jesus was intense and focused. His audiences just were not moved by the obvious miracles.

Unfortunately, we have not been similarly empowered. Imagine if we could wander through a few floors of University Hospital, returning the patients to full health, instantaneously. Would people then be more likely to take what we say with less skepticism? Interesting question. I don’t know what would happen. If thousands of people could see those miracles in Jesus’ day and just chalk it up to a good show, would people today be any more inclined to listen?

But God expects evidence to matter. All though the Bible, God made sure that His messengers were appropriately credentialed. What do we have? Certainly, the nature of the evidence has changed. But is it any less spectacular? We have tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts to verify that the New Testament has come to us exactly as it was written originally. Museums have thousands upon thousands of artifacts that validate that the history in the Old Testament happened exactly as written. Through the centuries, a pattern has developed. A professor of theology will float a theory that casts doubt on the historical veracity of the Scriptures, and many will jump on board. Then, about a century later, the theory will be shot down by a new archeological discovery, absolutely proving the theory wrong and the Scripture’s version of history right. God expects this evidence to be overwhelming to the open-minded.

So, I guess, that’s the problem. People are not so open-minded. Evidence does not seem to influence the majority. Well, evidence didn’t sway the majority in Jesus’ day, either. What can we do? First, targeting the majority will never work. In my estimation, the percentage of faithful people on earth at any one time has never exceeded 10%. So, we are not looking for huge numbers. If we try that approach, we would need to use political showmanship and self-centered appeals. Many groups have abandoned evidence altogether due to the small fraction that cares about it, so their appeals are cloaked in doctrinal, theological appeals that make no sense, and attract those who are not all that accustomed to differentiating between logic and smokescreen. The fraction of the population that cares about others and is devoted to reality, the truth, is small. So, we, in our day, need to use the same tactics as Jesus; put the evidence out there and let that small fraction who love truth be attracted to it.

The final scene takes place when the 70 return from their promotional tour. Obviously, they are happy about their successes. Jesus, without being a total wet blanket, refocuses their joy.

¹⁷ *Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.” ¹⁸ And He said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means*

hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” ²¹ In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ²² All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” ²³ Then He turned to His disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see; ²⁴ for I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it.”

The line, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven,” is a figure of speech describing Satan’s rapid decline in power due to the casting out of demons by the 70. The mention of “serpents and scorpions” also is a figure of speech, representing harmful things with which Satan may have tried to slow down the spread of the good news of the soon-to-happen Eternal Kingdom. Without telling them that they are wrong, Jesus gave them something even more important to rejoice about. Jesus was saying, “Your displays of power were great, but remember the true goal, being a part of the eternal kingdom, included in the family of God, without which you could not have performed those miracles.”

I think churches tend to react like the disciples. Certainly, presenting the good news to outsiders and seeing them espouse it is a good thing. But don’t let that wonderful outcome obscure the fact that, because you were able to spread that message, you have demonstrated that God approves of you.

Jesus continued His re-focusing by calling them “babes.” Throughout history, whether pagan, Israelite, or Christian, somebody or a group of somebodies rises to the top and become the authorities who interpret the religion for the common people. Jesus had a different structure in mind, reminiscent of Zechariah 11:11 in which Zechariah predicted that the poor would understand what the Messiah was doing, whereas the leaders, the foolish shepherds, would treat the Messiah as cheap and not worthwhile, which is exactly what happened.

The idea that the ordinary person can and must figure out the Scriptures is counter-intuitive to those who have bought into the worldly concept of authority driven leadership. Jesus rejoiced at the prospect that the ordinary people would run this new kingdom. The simplicity and obvious evidence of this new kingdom was to be its major characteristics, a leadership plan never before executed with any success.

Do we rejoice when we figure out the mysteries that prophets and angels desired to understand? Or, do we get mired in the details and overlook the most important parts?

All too often, we reduce Jesus to a smiling fountain of one-liners who died badly, overlooking that He was incredibly intense and focused. We need that same intensity and focus, totally committed, not just when it is convenient, presenting obvious and overwhelming evidence, not theories and doctrines, rejoicing that our names are written in heaven, neither fearsome nor harsh to those we meet, just obviously in command of life on this earth as we eagerly await the next one.