

Evil Orthodoxy

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. (Luk 9:51-56)

If you have been in church for any length of time, you will soon find a phenomenon that will scare you. You will find it within churches, within Christian families, within Christian marriages. I call it *evil orthodoxy*. That sounds like a contradiction in terms, and it is meant to sound that way. Orthodoxy is correct doctrine, and we all know what evil is. So how could they ever be together? They come together in many a believer, who goes on a crusade for what is right, but does so in an ungodly way. It happens to most of us at some point, to varying degrees. We pursue the right thing, the right truth, the correct doctrine, but the way it is done is ungodly.

It is part of the deceitfulness of sin that people think they are doing right while they are doing evil. Sin gets us to think that the evil that we are doing is justified because of why we are doing it. And there is no sin as immune to conviction as self-righteousness. When you think you are actually fighting on God's side, when you think you are crusading for the truth, fighting for what's right, you are deaf to the sound of your conscience saying that what you are doing is wrong.

This is much of what has been behind awful religious persecution, Inquisitions, witch-hunts, unspeakable tortures, ghastly behaviour within local churches, profound spiritual abuse in churches and Christian institutions. It's still what motivates many of the terrorists in the world. Supposedly spiritual motives silence the conscience about the deeply ungodly actions.

In this passage in Luke we come face to face with this zeal without love, evil orthodoxy, unholy conviction. We meet it in two of the last people we might have expected it in, James and John. And yet, at the same time, we can see how they were probably the most likely to fall into this sin. Their nickname was the 'sons of thunder', probably a reference to their zeal, boldness, courage. People who are willing to take a stand, contend, keep to a standard, defend a position are often the most prone to falling into this kind of evil, and the least likely to see their sin as sinful.

Understand, this passage has been placed in Scripture for our learning. We are to see ourselves here, and we are to see the saving remedy in our Lord Jesus Christ. We will see in this passage the open sin of the Samaritans, followed by the darker sin of the disciples, and then we'll see the Lord's response.

I. The Open Sin of the Samaritans

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.

This passage takes place in the last six months of the Lord's life, when Jesus was making a trip up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, around October. Now normally, when Jews in Galilee headed south to Jerusalem, they would avoid Samaria which was in the path to Jerusalem. For a Jew to go straight through Samaria was quite unusual. Remember the great hatred and antagonism that

existed between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans were descendants of Assyrians who had intermarried with Jews centuries earlier, and who had come up with their own religion, using the five books of Moses, and their own holy mountain, Mount Gerizim. The Jews looked upon Samaritans as not only racially inferior, but as apostates. Samaritans had no love for the Jews, who they saw as arrogant.

So only a mission of mercy from Jesus would go through Samaria. Jesus had done this once before, earlier in his ministry, when he had been in Jerusalem and now headed north, he had gone through Samaria and there spoken to the woman at the well, who had believed in him, along with many of her neighbours.

Now once again, Jesus goes through Samaria, and this time sends messengers ahead of him. However, this time, Jesus is not met with acceptance. We don't find a whole village coming out to meet and greet Jesus, listen to Him teach, and then turn to Him. We find the very opposite. We find that the village they entered did not want to host Jesus. We are given the reason they did not want to host Jesus: because He was determined to go to Jerusalem.

What's the big deal about that? Well, in doing so, the Samaritans were digging in their heels about their religion. They were saying, we do not acknowledge Jerusalem as the holy city, we do not submit to the authority there, we do not believe in the Temple located there, and if you are going up to Jerusalem then you are not welcome here. You are a committed Jew, you believe in the religion of the Jews, so you are our religious enemies, and don't expect a welcome from us.

Now were the Samaritans right or wrong in their actions or attitudes? Clearly wrong. They were wrong for not hosting the Messiah Himself. Jesus had said that if a town did not receive disciples in His name, they should shake off the dust of their feet upon leaving. They were wrong for their stubbornness, and refusing to even meet and hear Jesus. Undoubtedly some of this came from racial and ethnic pride, which was sinful. And all of this stemmed from a deep and terrible error in their beliefs. They were fundamentally wrong in their worship. Back in John 4, when Jesus had met the Samaritan woman at the well, she had brought up the difference in religion. 20 *"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."*

Jesus responded by saying a time was coming when true worshippers would no longer worship at a particular place. But then he added. *"You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. (Joh 4:22)* Very simply, the Samaritans were idolaters. The true revelation of God was, and is, in the Jewish Scriptures. The Messiah comes through the Jews. So the Samaritans actions here were wrong, they were clearly on the wrong side of God. And if the story had ended there, and the disciples had just kept on walking, we would have had no doubt who were the evildoers in this story.

Usually, a religious crusader, someone who acts like James and John did, sees something that was wrong. They see a genuine wrong done by someone else. A husband sees a fault in his wife. A parent sees some rebellion in his child. A pastor sees some gossip in the church. A manager sees some laziness in an employee. A church member sees some procedure in the constitution hasn't been carried out. A Christian sees another Christian becoming less vigilant in personal holiness.

But the issue here is not the first wrong. This passage is in the Bible to illustrate how a supposedly righteous response to sin can actually be far more evil than the original sin. But what happens next shows us a far greater evil, and far more sinister, darker kind of evil than the Samaritans' plain rejection of Jesus. For coming out of the mouths of James and John is something quite satanic.

II. The Darker Sin of the Disciples

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?"

James and John, known for their zeal, see the rejection of the Samaritans. Undoubtedly, they are feeling what all the disciples are feeling, a certain righteous indignation. It is wrong that the Samaritans cling to their false religion. It is wrong that they cling to it so fiercely that they will snub a Jewish prophet, and the greatest of them all, the Messiah. It is wrong that they will not even practice common Oriental hospitality, and shelter these travellers.

But what happens next shows that righteous anger turned into something much darker in their hearts. James and John come over to Jesus, and suggest, seemingly casually, would you like us to call down fire upon that village and consume them?

Now step back and think about what is coming out of their mouths. They are saying to Jesus, would you like us to annihilate an entire village of people? Would that please you, Lord? They are not scheming this in their hearts, quietly, and guiltily nursing their ethnic hatred, ashamed to verbalise their proposed genocide. They feel so comfortable with their hatred, that they are presenting it to Jesus for Him to bless, and even using Scriptural allusions to add some romantic flair. "Shall we re-enact the works of Elijah? He called down fire on his enemies. Clearly, these people are your enemies, and so we have a biblical precedent for this." Of course, when Elijah did that, he was calling down fire on soldiers sent by Jezebel to arrest and kill him. But, that doesn't matter, the mere similarity will do.

James and John want a nuclear holocaust on a village of men, women, and children who had rejected Jesus. They would not have presented this idea to Jesus, unless they had actually thought He would be pleased with it. So far was their thinking from Christ's, that they imagined Jesus would nod, and look on approvingly, smiling, as fire rained down on the village. They imagined God the Father would supply the fire, and happily enable them to be the judge and executioner.

The shocking and frightening thing is not simply James and John's callous suggestion to murder a whole village in the name of Jesus. The frightening thing is that they felt absolutely no conviction, no guilt, no pangs of conscience at all. Jesus had to rebuke them for them to even know where they were.

This is the deceitfulness of sin. This is nothing other than pride, but once couched in supposedly holy motives and righteous ideals, it cannot see itself. Once religious pride is controlling the ship, everything becomes lawful, even flaming those you don't like. This is unbelievably heartless, cruel, inhumane, and simply evil, but they would actually have felt joy and gladness in their work, had the Lord not rebuked them. The deceitfulness of sin.

How does it happen?

It begins when we divorce people from principles. Do you remember when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue? The Pharisees did not want Jesus to heal on the Sabbath. For them, the principle, the ideal, the truth of Sabbath was greater than the human beings who keep the Sabbath. And Jesus had to tell them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In other words, the truth of Sabbath was there for man's spiritual wellbeing. And when man's spiritual wellbeing was being sacrificed or delayed or harmed by the keeping of the principle, Jesus, with His authority knew which one had to give way. The principle was to be adapted for the person's spiritual

good.

It is possible to take a truth, an ideal, and make it a kind of god. For James and John, it was that people ought to receive Jesus, or they will face judgement. For us it is different. It may be that my child should obey me immediately and cheerfully. It may be that my brother in Christ should be faithful in attendance at church. It may be that the pastor should preach an expository sermon that is accurate and helpful. It may be that a Christian should dress modestly. But when you start taking that biblical truth, or a reasonable application of biblical truth, and you make it more important than the people God gave it for, it will no longer be truth that sets them free. It will become a tyrant that will rule with force and cruelty.

When that starts to happen, a second thing happens. We lose discernment between holy ideals and holy methods. If you had asked James and John if incinerating a town would be an appropriate response to the Samaritans, they would have said *yes*. If you had asked the Pharisees during the Crucifixion if what they were doing was a good thing, they would have said *yes*. They would have regarded that murder as the carrying out of justice, as an act of protection of the Jewish people, as the defence of the Torah. What starts to happen here is the call to obedience, the request for change, the confrontation with error becomes ungodly. The words, the deeds, the actions become words and deeds that God condemns in His Word as ungodly speech, ungodly actions. But once we have this principle, this ideal so absolutised, we lose sight of the people, so we lose sight of how we are going about calling for obedience. We cannot see the difference between contending and being contentious, between striving and sowing strife.

Like James and John, religious crusaders can find all kinds of Scriptural allusions to back up their unmistakable cruelty. But it is never right to do a wrong thing in the name of the right thing. It is never permissible to do what displeases God in the name of pleasing God.

I have seen things said and done in the name of Jesus that would freeze your blood. I have seen people who can become icy-cold to their closest friends overnight. I have seen people act like informers during the Soviet era, willing to betray their own parents if necessary, all in the name of godliness. I have seen men in the church say things to one another with such brutality, such coldness, such malice that you wondered if there was a soul behind those eyes.

You often see this kind of heartlessness in very young believers, who lack discernment and let their zeal get ahead of their judgement. But sadly, in its worst form, you find it in old, well-taught, seasoned believers. They are the worst kind: battle-hardened, cynical, and now nearly dead to the pangs of conscience, unreachable, who can only look back over the trail of destruction in their wake and keep telling themselves that they were right all along.

One wonders if some of this was not in Lucifer's original sin – a holy crusade for shared worship, the fight for the principle of due esteem to worthy angels, fighting for the good cause of angels having independent knowledge of good and evil, quoting God back to God, believing he was pursuing what was right. It would explain why men have never been as satanic as when they are supposedly crusading for a holy cause – doing evil in the name of good, immune to conscience, because they are flying the flag of righteousness.

So that parent who saw something wrong in the child, the husband or wife who saw something wrong in the spouse, the pastor who saw something wrong in the church member, the church member who saw something wrong in the pastor, the Christian who saw something wrong in another Christian, originally saw something real. But if he or she goes on to be cruel, malicious,

brutal, unkind, cutting, nasty, treacherous, underhanded, conniving, destructive, then he or she has allowed the deceitfulness of sin to deceive. At that point, you are not pursuing the other person's good. You have made an idol out of a principle, and are serving your god with selfish ungodliness.

How do I know that? Look at the Lord's response.

III. The Saving Heart of Christ

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 last part of verse 55 and verse 56 is found in most of the ancient manuscripts, and is not found in a few. Some of your versions regard those few as highly accurate, so you may have the words of verse 55 either missing or footnoted. I believe these verse are original, and their inclusion better makes sense of the whole passage.

What does Jesus say to James and John? He rebukes them. They have done wrong, and what He says to them is a rebuke: you have done wrong, and you need to repent. You are sinning and you need to stop.

In his rebuke, He says two things to them. The first is a description of their hearts. The second is a call to be like Him.

He says first, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of." What does this mean? *Spirit* there is small-s, and it refers to an attitude, a mood, an approach. Jesus says, you don't realise what kind of attitude, what kind of mood, what kind of approach you have right now. You don't recognise what is in you right now – the deceitfulness of sin. You think you are doing right, you think you are pleasing me, you think you are doing My will, but you are actually in the grip of self-serving pride. You are right in this very moment in the grip of sin, the sin of hatred, cruelty, malice, but you do not see it, because you are blinded by your pride. You see only what you want to see.

And then to wake them up out of their sin, Jesus calls them to be like Him. He says, the Son of Man did not came to destroy men's lives, but to save them. Here James and John think they are serving Christ when they offer to destroy the Samaritans, and Jesus wakes them up by saying, my mission is not destruction, my mission is salvation. Don't claim you are doing my will, when what you do is destructive of people and not edifying.

Now I think James and John would not have received those words from anyone except Jesus Himself. They strike me as the kind of men who, if you or me had said to them, "You don't know what kind of spirit you're of, Jesus didn't come to destroy people but to save them!" they would have responded, You're just one of those man-pleasers who is afraid to do the hard things. You are one of those compromisers too scared to say and do the hard things, too squeamish for the conflict that is necessary." When you are in the grip of this kind of pride, all the calls around you to soften, be gentle, be meek, demonstrate mercy, be patient, be a peacemaker sound like calls to compromise.

And let's be honest, there are too many people out there who refuse to do the hard things, who refuse to preach the truth without compromise, who are scared of offending people, scared of conflict, who always want niceness and peace. We need people like Daniel, like Shadrach, Meschach and Abed-nego, who can stand for the faith. So how do you know if you are being like Daniel and his friends, or if you have become like James and John? How do you know if you are being like a Stephen or like the Pharisees? How do you know when you are being like Saul before

his conversion, or like him as Paul, after his conversion?

The words of Jesus give much of the answer. The hallmark of someone driven by religious pride is destruction in his wake. Evil orthodoxy leaves a trail: a trail of broken lives, broken relationships, bitter spouses, bitter children, divided churches. If in your contending for the truth, or contending for holiness, you have driven people to either cower before you in fear, or get away from you altogether, then you are destroying, not building. If your parenting makes your children vow to get away as soon as they are physically and financially able, you're destroying. If your actions in church make most people wish you would leave, you're destroying. If in your efforts to purify God's church you end up dividing it and breaking it down, wearing out the leaders God appoints through His people then you are destroying, not building. You have lost sight of people, and are hanging onto principles, which have become idols, and your pride will destroy more and more people as you keep pursuing your idols. If your methods would be considered cruel, inhumane, discourteous, rude, ungodly, then you are destroying what Christ is seeking to save, burning what Christ is seeking to build.

If we are Christians, then we are Christ-followers. We are disciples, followers of Christ, who came to seek and to save. What that means is that we should of all people be the most humane, the most compassionate, the most merciful. We should be the very last people to destroy men's lives – that doesn't just mean physically, but emotionally, mentally. We should be little saviours, continually working on ways to see people drawn to the Saviour. We should want to see our fellow Christians further saved from their sins, be it our spouses, our children, our friends in church. But if our **motive** is for people to be like our Saviour, then our **methods** have to be those of our Saviour: meekness with firmness, truth with love, contending for true doctrine with a peacemaker's heart, zealous for holiness with tears for those who sin, direct but kind, exacting but patient. Don't claim to be pushing people to Christ if the way you do it is completely unlike Christ.

So what do we do when we see this sin of spiritual pride in ourselves? First, we need to repent of breaking what God is building. I think James and John must have been smitten to the heart when Jesus said that to them. In a moment they must have gone from glowingly proud to deeply ashamed. Only the Holy Spirit can do this, but would that we would look into the hurt faces of the people we have harmed, see the deep wounds we inflicted that were not given in the service of Christ, and be broken in spirit. That we would see that we were flying the flag of Christ while doing the work of Satan. That we would confess to others that our own hearts were deceived by sin, and that the spirit of pride was controlling us, not the Holy Spirit.

Second, we need to remember that the truths of God's Word are for people. The Sabbath was made for man. That doesn't mean you compromise one inch on Scripture. It doesn't mean we water down the message. It doesn't mean we compromise on principles. It doesn't mean we avoid necessary conflict, or the hard conversations, or accountability, or church discipline or necessary rebuke. But what it does mean is that all those things are there to seek and to save lost people, to seek and to sanctify saved people. And if you win arguments, or hold to positions and destroy relationships and leave people in despair and in pain, and turned off Christ, you've missed the point.

You see, James and John are like us. We want results, and we want them now. We want to see change, and obedience in front of us. You obey or you die. Black and white. But Jesus understood that watered seeds may grow at different times. He knew that rejection and struggle is part of the path many people take. He knew that in the future the gospel would go to Samaria with Philip and huge numbers of people would be saved. Now wasn't the time.

Religious pride is always impatient. It cannot wait, because it has no faith. It must have results, and does not trust the sovereignty of God to bring about change in His time. So it abandons God's methods and forces matters with sinful methods. If I want to join in Christ's saving work, then I do it His way, for His glory, trusting to His timing.

I can use Christ's methods when I have the trust Christ had in His Father. He could love the Samaritans and know that if judgement was coming, it wasn't now. I can say that of my neighbour. If he or she rejects, it is not up to me to force change. I can trust in God.

I don't want to arrive at the Judgement Seat of Christ and hear the Lord say "You did not know what manner of spirit you were of." I don't want to find out that I was a destroyer. So I need to keep telling myself: in my home, in my church, in my neighbourhood – these are people whom Christ came to save, and I want to join that saving work, using His methods, trusting to His timing.