

## **There is Another King: Jesus**

*Luke – Acts*

### **Jesus First!**

*Luke 9:51 – 62*

#### **Introduction: Putting Jesus First**

When your identity is in Christ, Jesus defines you. Let me say that again. When your identity is in Christ, Jesus defines you. On two particular occasions, I had the opportunity to show what my identity in Christ meant – it meant putting Jesus first. The first concerned who would determine what kind of job I would get: my parents, or Jesus. When I was a freshman in college, my younger sister started her freshman year of high school. Because I went away for college, I prayed that she would be exposed to the gospel and that Jesus would begin to heal her. Little did I know that there was a man in his fifties who taught high school nicknamed “Mr. Mac” by the students. He was a Christian, and he opened his classroom every day at lunch to some Christian activity. On Mondays he would have worship songs playing. On Tuesdays he would have a Bible study. On Wednesdays, he would have a student at a nearby Bible school come in and share. On Thursdays he would have a discussion time. And on Fridays he would have a free hangout time. This was a public high school we’re talking about. I don’t know how he did it, but I was amazed when my sister called me to tell me that she had accepted Christ because of what this man was doing. I went to go meet him, and his face had ‘joy’ written all over it. Because of that, I thought, “Maybe I’ll be a high school teacher one day.” I kept that to myself until the summer between my sophomore and junior years in college. That’s when I shared with my parents very carefully, “Mom, Dad, I’m thinking about the possibility of doing high school teaching, and I haven’t decided anything yet, but I just wanted to let you know I’m thinking about it.” My parents flipped out. They wanted me to be a doctor, engineer, lawyer, or professor. So they demanded to know, “Well, why are we sending you to Stanford, then???” I said, “Good point.” We argued about it all summer long. By the end of the summer, I said to them, “Ok, I’m not even saying that I’m sure I want to do high school teaching. But I’d like to keep that option open. If you believe that paying for my college education allows you to limit what I want to do and be the top authority in my life, then you don’t have to pay for it. I’ll go to another school, a cheaper school, and pay for the tuition myself. It might take me a little longer because I’d have to work, or I may have to take out more loans, but that’s fine: I don’t have to go to Stanford. But if you want to send me to Stanford, you’ve got to do it as a gift, not as a way to control my choices.” The issue for me was simple: I wanted to put Jesus first. If my parents thought that they should be first on the basis of paying for my tuition, then in all fairness to them and to my Lord, I needed to guard against that.

When Jesus comes to live in your heart by his Spirit, he defines you. That is what it means to have your identity in Christ. The question put more practically is, who comes first in your decisions? It’s not that everything else ceases to matter, but that Jesus matters most, and Jesus is first. We are to place him first in everything. We are going to see him say this four times in our text: Luke 9:51-62.

#### **The Setting – Jesus’ Journey to Jerusalem: v.51**

We are joining Jesus on the road to the capital, in Luke 9:51. “And it came about, when the days were approaching for his ascension, that he resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is a time of corruption and pessimism, and here is the Jewish Presidential hopeful on the road to the capital, surrounded by his campaign supporters. And can you imagine what the buzz must have been like in the Jesus party? “He’s a powerful speaker. He cares about social issues. He’s got integrity.” Here is the man people want to be their leader. And this hope is not entirely misplaced. Luke is already pointing us towards the ascension, the days were approaching for his ascension, the moment when he took office. The ascension is Jesus’ inauguration into office. They expected Jesus to take office and get things done. And they might have thought... what? That he’s going to wipe corruption out of the capital. That he’s going to bring peace and prosperity to all Israelites. He’s going to give us cabinet positions! All the things you’d reasonably expect out of an above average statesman.

If Jesus were standing before you today and told you that we were going from Boston to the White House and that he was going to make major changes, REAL changes, what would you say? Well, maybe you’d be

totally for it at first, because you want change, REAL change. But then Jesus says, “Once we get to the White House, I’m going to die, rise again and live inside you, and you’re eventually going to leave the country because the White House is going to be destroyed and the United States is going to be taken over. You’re going to leave behind your investments in the U.S. because they’ll be worthless. The only thing it’ll be good for is attracting people to your community, which will soon be a migrant community! And then you’re going to other countries, teaching people to live by my teaching and your example, and to wait until I come again to fulfill my inauguration promises. In the meantime, you are to put me first.”

We’re going to see Jesus have four interactions, and he’ll challenge those people to place his first in four ways. He wants to come before our natural feelings, before our desire for financial security, before our cultural norms, and before any other authority. Four interactions, four aspects of our identity. Let’s join Jesus on the road to his inauguration in the capital and in our lives.

### **Jesus Before Our Natural Feelings: v.52 – 56**

The first interaction is between Jesus and the two loudmouth disciples, James and John, who have a spirit of destruction. In v.52-56, “And he sent messengers on ahead of him. And they went, and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make arrangements for him. And they did not receive him, because he was journeying with his face toward Jerusalem. 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? But he turned and rebuked them and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” And they went on to another village.”

James and John didn’t like Samaritans. In fact, they would have thought, “We made the trip out to them, and they didn’t even want us to stay there. Although they should have felt honored, instead they’re totally inhospitable. Come to think of it, I don’t know why we expected different. Those Samaritans have never really been part of us. They’re only half Jewish and the rest Assyrian, and you know how that is. I’ve never felt comfortable with them. It’s a good thing they’re segregated from the rest of Israel. It’s no wonder they don’t like our capital. They don’t like to worship there, since they worship on their own mountain. So Jesus, let’s just forget about them. Better yet, let’s command fire from heaven and consume them so we never have to think about them again.”

What’s going on for James and John? They make only one attempt – only one! – at reaching out to the Samaritans, and then they want to be rid of them forever. You know how it is when you give people only one chance? The nights my dad would come home drunk when he went out again the very next night, there was a small part of me that said, “If you die in a car accident, I wouldn’t feel guilty. You had your chance.” For you, maybe there’s someone in this very fellowship you don’t really like. Now you may not let on, right? You put up with that person for now, right? After all, you can avoid having a deep conversation with that person for a few years before you graduate and leave. What’s a few years, anyway? Well, if that person later seems to reject Christ, you may not care. You may even say, “I knew it, all along. That person was never really part of us. You had your chance.” And in the wider Christian world, did you know that we still have to share the gospel with white men? There is a tendency today, I think, to say, “After centuries of having Jesus in Europe and America, you’ve had your chance.” But we still need to evangelize white men.

Where do the disciples get their hostility? Maybe if we can understand their problem, we can understand our difficulties. Whatever else we can say about them, we can say that they have natural prejudices coming from an unforgiving spirit. We know this because Jesus in return rebuked them and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of.” These are the disciples before the Resurrection and before Pentecost, so there’s still something lacking inside them. They are a part of the new movement of the Holy Spirit led by Jesus, and they’ve tasted it, but the Spirit hasn’t fully indwelt them yet. It’s their old spirit, that deep part of them, that wants to say, “You had your chance, and that’s it.” Essentially they’re saying, “Because I have my limits, I’m going to put ME first.”

So how does Jesus’ Spirit change us? By joining us to Jesus himself, and making Jesus’ mission our mission so that Jesus is first, not our feelings. Notice how Jesus refers to his own mission as the way to understand what it means to have the right spirit. “For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives,

but to save them.” When Jesus places his Spirit in us, he comes to make us as forgiving as he is and as interested in their salvation as he is. Because Jesus gives them second chances, you need to give them second chances, and third chances, and fourth chances... Jesus being first means that our feelings and our prejudices are not first.

Illus: On January 8, 1956, a young woman named Elizabeth became a widow. Her husband Jim Elliot had gone with four other American men to the jungles of Ecuador. They had gone as Christian missionaries to establish contact with a tribe of natives called the Auca Indians. The only previous Auca response to the outside world had been to attack all strangers, so everyone knew the risks. Surely enough, the Aucas distrusted the five men, later saying that they feared they were cannibals. They speared them to death. Over the next few days, search and rescue parties found the bodies of the five men, and Elizabeth, who had been waiting with the Quichuas tribe to the west, received word that her husband Jim had been killed. Elizabeth struggled with the loss and her anger. I’m sure one of the thoughts that crossed her mind was, “You’ve had your chance.” But on October 8, 1958, Elizabeth and one of the sisters of the other men made contact with the Aucas. When they learned that she was the widow of one of the men they killed, they asked why she, too, would come. She told them about Jesus Christ. They received her and over the next few years, many of the Aucas came to know Jesus because Elizabeth Elliot had put Jesus first, even before her own pain and anger.

### **Jesus Before Financial Security: v.57 – 58**

Second, Jesus comes first before your desire for security. In v.57-58, there is a second interaction between Jesus and a person. “And as they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’”

This person comes up to him and makes this bold claim, “I will follow you wherever you go.” There’s no indication who it is, man or woman (I’m going to assume that it’s a woman) or how Jesus knows that this person struggles with financial security. But Jesus warns this person that while foxes have homes, and birds have homes, the Son of Man doesn’t, and neither will she. Now how did Jesus know that this was what she needs to think through? James and John’s problems were out there for everyone to see, and the next two men that come up are also obvious. This is the only person where the text doesn’t tell us how Jesus knows what to say. Maybe he’s using divine knowledge, but maybe not. Maybe it’s the fact that her hands are smooth, like she hadn’t worked a single day in her life. Maybe he knew her from childhood to be someone who needs to know where her place is, where she belongs, what she can expect of other people, where things are at, and what her world will look like tomorrow, five years from now, twenty years from now. Maybe there’s something in her voice that says, “I’ll follow you, but I’d like some guarantees. I want good accommodations; I want to know that the man you’re going to bring me will provide consistently.” (Does that sound familiar?) Maybe it’s the way she dressed that gives her away as a materialistic person. I don’t know; it could be any of these things. But Jesus knows that he needs to challenge her sense of security.

When Jesus says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests,” he’s not saying you’ll be literally homeless all the time, but that you will never feel at home in this world. If you were a fox, you’d have a hole in the ground that you’d call a den. You’d feel safe in that fox den, as if you belonged there. Birds feel the same way about nests. They feel safe and as if they belonged. But you won’t have those things. At any given moment, you could be called upon to pack up your things and minister somewhere else or give up your things for other people. And in that place, you may not feel safe and as if you belonged. You won’t be able to put down roots anywhere emotionally or be overly sentimental about anything you have.

There could be another layer of meaning to this. “Birds of the air” could be a symbol for Gentile rulers, out of Ezekiel 31, and the fox was a symbol of Herod’s family, who ruled in Israel. So Jesus could also be making the point that both Jews and Gentiles have their place where they feel at home, but again, you won’t feel the same way. It would be as if Jesus used elephants and donkeys, the symbolic animals of the Republicans and Democrats, to say that they might feel at home in the U.S., but we won’t. We won’t feel at home anywhere.

Remember that Jesus is preparing his disciples to actually leave the country and minister everywhere. Now for some of us, we may leave our country, too. Some of us may not. But Jesus wants all of us to be aliens and pilgrims wherever we are, not settlers. He calls us to sit loose to everything financial for the sake of loving others and putting him first. Think about the mansion God will give you permanently in the age to come. Think about it! Now think about every place that you live here on earth as a motel room. You don't need to throw up a lot of decorations in a motel room; you'll be checking out soon anyway! Sure it's important to have a clean, functional place to live, but it can be simple. Do you need to collect lots of stuff? As if you're bedding down there forever? You're just passing through!

That was why it was so important for me to talk to my parents early about my thoughts about my career. My parents have the immigrant mentality. They've come to the most affluent nation on earth to share in its wealth and sink their roots down. Fundamentally, I cannot take that as the agenda for my life. Putting Jesus first means that my home is not here and that Jesus comes first, before financial security.

Before Ming and I met, I dated a young woman – a friend of mine – who had never really thought hard about verses like these. I wasn't sure at the time how it would go. So right from the start, I told her that I was thinking about living in the inner city, taking lesser paying jobs, adopting kids, and living in a multiple family household. She had never really thought about things like that, but she said she was open to thinking about it and talking it over with me, so on that premise, we started dating. We got along really well and a lot of our friends thought we were a good couple. But a few months later, she told me that her parents wanted me to go back to school and get a higher paying job. And a little while after that, she told me that she herself wanted me to do that. I asked her in response whether she was any more open to thinking about the things I wanted to do, and it was clear that she wasn't any further along. So we broke up. It was painful, but it was clean and clear. When I met Ming in March of 1998, I knew something was right: even though she had grown up in a family that had struggled financially, and even though she had went to Harvard and could have made her past experience a distant memory, she chose not to follow that path. She became an IV staffworker, which didn't make a lot of money! She had started urban projects for students, she was interested in foster parenting, and she had thought about living in a multiple family household, too! In fact, just before we met, she had given a big part of her savings to a pastor in India. I thought, "This is a woman who puts Jesus first!" And a year later, we were married.

If there is one thing that prevents people from growing spiritually, it's money. They graduate, they no longer think about how they want to know God more or how to develop their spiritual gifts, they get sucked into their job and the diversions money can buy, they get married to nominal Christians who utterly reject this teaching of Jesus, and when they finally wake up to the meaninglessness of it all, a good part of their life has passed them by. They've married the wrong person, they've started down the wrong lifestyle, they've made the wrong decisions. We don't know what decision this unnamed person made. Maybe she went away sad. But maybe she realized that Jesus is more important than security, and she put Jesus first after all.

### **Jesus Before Cultural Norms: v.59 – 60**

This ties in directly with the third interaction. In v.59-60, Jesus encounters a man. "And he said to another, "Follow me." But he said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father."

Now what's going on here? Is this guy wanting to go to a funeral over the weekend? No: When this man says this, he's really asking to wait at home until his father passes away. It was considered a cultural norm in Israel to do this. If you were a dutiful son, the most urgent thing for you would be to honor to your father, and the way to do this is to stay under his authority until he died. You would put all other things on the backburner until your father dies. Then you're more free to do what you want. So essentially this man is saying, "Yeah, I want to come but I have to live by cultural norms, things that are more urgent, like what society says I should do for my father, that take higher priority."

This is so common, isn't it? What is the most urgent thing on your plate right now? It's probably a cultural norm. Graduating from college, getting into grad school, starting your career, finding "the one." A lot of people think they'll serve God after these things. And it's easy to believe that, isn't it? On one level, it

seems so logical, especially if you're a passive person who just responds to what's in front of you! Out of all your large commitments, cultural norms somehow become the most urgent.

But Jesus says in response that there is something more urgent: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." In other words, "Let the spiritually dead stay at home to bury the physically dead; you come along and join me as we go everywhere." Put in a different way, "Let those who do not know me carry on life as usual and do their traditional duties; I'm giving you something new and higher to do with me." There is nothing more urgent than proclaiming the kingdom of God, the long-awaited time period where the God of Israel would claim His authority over the whole world through Jesus. And because Jesus is the king of that kingdom, he is a higher priority than anything or anyone else.

Now what does it mean to place Jesus before cultural norms while you're in college? That probably depends on your gifting and your circumstances, but let me tell you what it means in general. It means seeing your college years not just as the time to get a degree, but as a time for you to mature spiritually with other people your age, and to develop your speaking gifts. I say speaking gifts for four reasons: 1) because Jesus says "go and proclaim everywhere." 2) We can serve people without speaking about Jesus, and that's very important but in general, to share and proclaim Jesus takes more practice and a different kind of courage. 3) In Luke, having the Holy Spirit is associated with speaking. And 4) our God is the God who speaks.

Let me tell you some stories to try to flesh this out. One is of my friend Lawrence, who is one of the most gifted Christian counselors I know. He has the gift of discernment. When Lawrence was a freshman, he had all the classic symptoms of hardship. He was homesick. He emailed his high school friends until late in the night. He didn't get up in the mornings for his classes. But as Jesus worked in his life, and as he made Christian friends, he recovered from the depression he was in. His friends found that he was great to talk to because he was insightful and empathetic. Because of all the late night talks Lawrence had with his roommate, his roommate Mike became a Christian. Two female friends in the dorms accepted Christ, in part because Lawrence talked to them. Another friend from back home accepted Christ late one night over an email conversation with him. Lawrence decided to put Jesus above two cultural norms: He decided to switch out of a very prestigious and demanding career track in order to spend more time with people. And he switched into psychology, which not a lot of men go into. Those were hard choices, but it was great for allowing him to proclaim the kingdom of God in a meaningful way to people. After he graduated, he came to live with me in an inner city neighborhood called East Palo Alto. Just one year into his master's program in psychology, he applied for a school psychologist job in the East Palo Alto school district, a position that required a master's degree and experience. Lawrence had neither, but they hired him anyway. He learned that part of his job was to do visitations to kids' homes to counsel their parents. Then he discovered that he had access to the files of every student in the district, which included family background, hardships, classroom behavior, and so on. That included all the families that were in our apartment complex and especially the young boys who came to his Bible clubs. He had more opportunities to speak into their lives and proclaim the kingdom of God than he had ever dreamed he would have.

Now did that just happen easily? No – it took practice and feedback, practice and feedback. It happened in community and it required prayer and hard work. My parents would have said, "There are more important things to do." The world says, "That's stupid – why would you put so much time and energy into sharing about Jesus when you can take advantage of all these other things?" But there is nothing more important. It was the first thing on his to do list.

#### **Jesus Before All Other Authorities: v.61 – 62**

This is almost the same point as the fourth interaction in v.61-62: "And another also said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." 62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

The people who remain behind can say good-bye to those leaving. This gentle formality is observed to the letter all over the Middle East on formal and informal occasions. The one who leaves requests permission

to go. He asks, "With your permission?" Those who remain behind then respond, "May you go safely," or "God go with you" or "May you go in peace."

Bailey believes that this person is really not saying he'd follow Jesus. He's saying, "I will follow you, Lord, but of course the authority of my father is higher than your authority, and I must have his permission to go." Even today, an engineer in his forties will make the traditional visit from a large city to his father in the village to ask permission to take a trip, change his job, or something. Even if the trip is ceremonial and the son is in reality running his own life, he will still make the trip to his father as a sign of respect. Bailey says that when he taught this passage in a Middle Eastern seminary about Jesus claiming more authority than fathers, his students' faces turned white.

If you're like me, parental authority is one of the most confusing aspects of life, especially when you're in college. Honoring your parents is one thing, but abiding by their authority is another. In my first story about telling my parents about my desire to teach high school, I feel that I honored them by sharing with them early on, inviting them to give me their thoughts and feelings, and listening to them. They told me to not go into that field, and gave me an ultimatum. But I could not accept their authority as final. So I tried to honor them by offering to pay for my own education and go to another school, and I made it clear to them that while I respected them, there was another authority in my life.

The second occasion I had to put Jesus first came after I graduated. It concerned who would determine where I would live: Jesus, or someone else. In 1995, I moved into an inner city neighborhood called East Palo Alto. It sits right in the middle of booming, affluent Silicon Valley. But in spite of that, in 1992, that city had had the highest per capita murder rate in the nation. Right next to a freeway onramp was one of the worst apartment complexes there, alone. It was dilapidated because the owner just wanted to make money off the property. It was right next to a freeway onramp, so drug dealers saw it as an easy location with a quick getaway. And it was overcrowded with low-income Mexican immigrant families struggling to make it, whose kids would play in the dumpsters because there was nowhere clean enough to play. A Christian couple I knew, Jose and Jennifer Espinosa, knew a lot of the families there and did ministry among them. I wanted to minister with them. I wanted to get to know the families, the struggles, and the issues. It was interesting how many people didn't like my decision. My non-Christian friends thought I was crazy because I could have gotten shot; I said that I was tired of putting my fears first, I wanted to put Jesus first in my life. Some of my Christian friends didn't like it but all I could say was, "Doesn't Jesus care for the poor through us?" And lastly, my parents and especially my mom didn't like it. She came to visit me and threatened to disown me if I did not move out. After a month of wrestling about this, I agreed to move out for a short time to preserve our relationship for the short term. And by short term I meant 6 months to a year, because we had not yet had the time to talk about all this, and especially for me to explain who Jesus is. But I told her that I had every intention of going back for the long term, that I intended to do this for as long as I could, that the woman I married had to be excited about this, too, and that we would try to raise our children in a tougher neighborhood. This was just the beginning of some decisions that she would not like because our motivations were fundamentally different. Her motivations were security and self-protection, but mine by the Spirit of God were significance for Jesus. And, I said that pulling the strings of disowning me would not work with me ever again. Two days later, she said I could stay. I stayed, and by the time Ming and I got married and moved out to Boston to do inner city ministry here, a community of nine other Christians had formed in East Palo Alto ministering to families and children there.

Once again the issue here is who comes first in your life. Who's authority do you listen to first? Who defines you? Is it your parents? Is it the people around you? Is it your university? Or is it Jesus?

The final authority that Jesus challenges is that of your university. My last year at Stanford, the administration said, "There will be no proselytizing in the dorms." An outspoken Campus Crusade staff worker was given a restraining order from being on campus. I don't know exactly what you face here at BU. But I do know that in an atmosphere of so-called "tolerance," many times there is a gagrule explicitly or implicitly put on Christians. The problem is that, by definition, a Christian is someone who puts Jesus first and is defined by him. And Simon Peter learned from this encounter and many others to say, "We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard... We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 4:20; 5:29).

If adversity hits you, be encouraged. Martin Luther King, Jr. made a very powerful observation of what happens when Christians really put Jesus first. On April 16, 1963, in response to eight white clergymen who had criticized his participation in a non-violent demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama regarding integration, he wrote probably his most widely read statement, *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. In it, he says, "There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on in the conviction that they were a colony of heaven and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated. They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest."

Now, what does this mean for you? When you look at the entirety of your life and the patterns in your life, Jesus has got to be the foremost authority in your life. That doesn't mean you do nothing else. You'll be able to honor and love your parents in a different way. You'll be able to take classes though with a different mindset. You'll still be able to get some sleep though with a different sense of rest. Being defined by Jesus has got to affect and even limit those things, and not the other way around.

### **He'll Transform YOU**

After these four encounters, Jesus made his way up to Jerusalem with the disciples. And after he died and rose again, the disciples understood that Jesus didn't come to clean up Jerusalem. He came to replace it. He became the place where God meets human beings; he became the final authority; he became the capital city from which God's will was declared. And when he sent his Spirit into his disciples at Pentecost and following, he placed himself in each of them. He didn't just challenge different aspects of who they were; he challenged everything starting from square one because he defined them from within, by his Spirit. And that gives us the reason to say this: When Jesus comes into us, he comes in to define who we are, and that is why we must put Jesus first.

Questions for them at the end: Go and ask Jesus about this

1. Are there areas in my life where I have not placed you first?
2. How can I put you first in those areas? What does that mean for me?
3. What are ways that you want or need to grow spiritually that can take place in relationship with people in the here and now?