IGNORING JESUS’ PRINCIPLES

The Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 brought an end to 150 years of sporadic and intense periods of Christian persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Prior to this decree, believers who refused to swear loyalty to Caesar as a god had been hunted, fined, imprisoned, fed to lions, crucified, and burned alive, among many other atrocities. Houses of worship were razed to the ground and property was confiscated. Scriptures, which were slowly and painfully copied by hand, were burned. Weary Christians, who had been hiding in caves and other remote places, welcomed the Edict of Milan, which was the first Roman proclamation that guaranteed religious liberty to every citizen of the empire.

Who could have guessed that in just a few years, professed Christians would be clamoring for domination over other religions and even over fellow Christians who held opposing beliefs? During the Roman emperor Constantine’s reign (A.D. 306–337), Christian churches formed alliances with the monarch in exchange for government favors. The church as a whole grew corrupt with political and financial ambitions that directly opposed Jesus’ principles. If the church had remained true to Christ’s spirit, the unholy mixture of church and state that resulted in the religious tyranny of the Middle Ages may never have happened.

In just a few centuries, the church had ironically become an excellent example of what Jesus said not to be and not to do. In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation began to slowly rediscover the basics of religious liberty. Today, it’s imperative that we know and promote the original principles Jesus established.
Write out Luke 9:43–56 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 54–56. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE SPIRIT OF THE DISCIPLES

Adventists have long believed that “religious liberty includes the human right to have or adopt the religion of one’s choice, to change religious belief according to conscience, to manifest one’s religion individually or in community with fellow believers, in worship, observance, practice, witness, and teaching, subject to respect for the equivalent rights of others” (Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual [2015], 95). Jesus Christ is the perfect example of One who had the power to compel and control and yet always honored every individual's choice of whether or not to believe, to profess, to follow. Jesus’ respect for individual rights highly contrasted His disciples’ impulse to force submission.

Jesus’ disciples were deeply entrenched in their culture. It was an age of intense political strife and national bigotry. Much like today, various factions competed for power and resources. This was especially true when Rome ruled Israel, evidenced by the occasional rebel group that formed to gain freedom and restore Israel’s national honor. Restlessness and revolution stirred the masses in Christ’s time, affecting the disciples to the degree that James and John asked if Jesus wanted them to call fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritan people after they failed to give Him a warm welcome (Luke 9:54).

The disciples coated their hostility with a veneer of spirituality and supported it with a reference to the Old Testament. In no area is the human heart more deceptive than when justifying the spirit of cruelty and retaliation. If only the disciples could see themselves as Jesus saw them! Jesus warned them, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of” (v. 55).

Jesus’ answer to their violent request highlighted the boundaries He would never cross. Not once in His ministry did He try to intimidate, threaten, or force people to follow Him or reform their ways, for His mission in no way included destruction of life or property (v. 56). Unfortunately, this attribute has often been forgotten in the centuries since Christ lived. If the church leaders and professed Christians in every age had always renounced the misguided spirit of the disciples and embraced Christ’s spirit, church history never would have included the acts of persecution and tyranny committed in the name of religion.

Jesus clearly told us how we should react when a house or town does not receive us warmly: “And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet” (Matt. 10:14). When we have experienced rejection, there is no need to call down fire from heaven or launch an attack—whether physical or verbal. Jesus instructs us to simply shake the dust from our feet and move on. That’s all.
WHAT ABOUT ELIJAH?

If the disciples were so wrong in asking for heavenly fire to consume the Samaritans, why did the prophet Elijah call fire down from heaven in 2 Kings 1:1–16? The context of the stories is entirely different: Elijah prayed for fire to vindicate God's name, but the disciples were angry that the people did not receive them well. Also, in the Old Testament system of theocracy, God at times worked in His role as judge and executioner through divinely appointed people. While 2 Kings 1 doesn't state whether God directed Elijah to call fire down on the first two emissaries from the king, it does specify that Elijah was instructed to spare the third emissary (v. 15). The third emissary was saved by God's direct intervention, showing that even in moments of judgment, God still extends mercy wherever He can.

The Old Testament gives many accounts of God acting in judgment. Genesis recounts how He destroyed the world by a flood (8:21–23) and destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire (19:28). Both stories are an example of God's final judgment coming upon the whole world (Rev. 20:9). God is the final Judge; He will have the last word in every person's case, which is the one thing that comforts people who have suffered unfair judgments in earthly courts and human relationships. God's court will reverse the erroneous decisions of the earthly courts. God is both just and merciful and He will be worshiped by all creation when saints and angels alike agree that every one of God's judgments are fair and right (Rev. 15:2–4; 19:1–4).

While in the Old Testament God at times exercised His role as judge through prophets such as Elijah, in the New Testament, Jesus completely removed the responsibility of destruction from the church. This explains why God has never again used His church as an instrument of ruin, though the New Testament does contain stories of God's direct judgments, such as the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). Jesus' rebuke against James and John for wanting to bring down fire from heaven applies to all Christians throughout time. Any follower of Christ who claims to be judge stands under the same Divine rebuke.

Jesus will come as Judge and Executioner when He returns, doing the work of destruction through the angels (Matt. 13:41, 42), but when He came the first time as a human example to every leader in the church, His mission never included extinguishing human life. The most physical force Jesus ever used was when He overturned tables in the sanctuary (Mark 11). He overturned tables, not families or people's lives. Jesus was gentle. He never once bruised or hurt a person (Matt. 12:20). The only life Jesus took was that of the fig tree (Mark 11:20, 21), and that was an example of a nation doomed by Divine judgment.
What relationship do the following verses have with Luke 9:43–56?

2 Kings 1
Genesis 19:1–29
Revelation 20:9
Matthew 10:14–16
Matthew 12:14–21
Philippians 2:1–8

What other verses come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

THE ULTIMATE DEMONSTRATION

Christ’s spirit was most vividly demonstrated through His choice to submit to the cruelty of the cross. He had repeatedly warned the disciples of what was coming, but Jesus’ path of submission was so foreign to the disciples that they were afraid to ask any questions about it (Luke 9:44, 45). The disciples were still bickering among themselves over who would achieve the most power and control (vv. 46–48). The disciples were grasping for exactly what Jesus was giving up. They were striving for the power connected with kingship while Jesus was making Himself the very lowest of servants. Jesus’ spirit is the complete opposite of this world’s spirit. The kingdom of heaven operates on principles that oppose the principles of this world. Jesus was inviting His disciples to let go of their ambitions and join Him on His journey of self-denial.

In response to their bickering, Jesus drew the disciples’ attention to a nearby child, for children were considered the least consequential people around. He demonstrated that if they would minister to the needs of children, they would align with His spirit and mission, “for he who is least among you all will be great” (v. 48). All of this appeared backward to the proud hearts of the disciples, who after years of ministry with Jesus still had much to learn about His spirit.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the church was entrusted with the mission of revealing His spirit to the world. However, the world will never see Christ through us if we aren’t emptied of self and haven’t made room for Him to shine through. It is the spirit of Christ alone that can equip the church to meet a crisis properly and unify the church when the world is divided. Paul admonishes us to “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:5–8). Only when we embrace Jesus’ humble spirit and follow His example of emptying self will we enjoy unity between believers (vv. 2, 3). If every person embraced Christ’s spirit by looking out “not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (v. 4), there would never be another violation of religious liberty. The spirit of Christ is the ultimate solution to every form of tyranny and oppression.
NO FORCED ALLEGIANCE

“The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan’s deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan. This work only one Being in all the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known. Upon the world’s dark night the Sun of Righteousness must rise, ‘with healing in His wings.’ Malachi 4:2.” (Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* [1898], 22.)

“In striking contrast to the wrong and oppression so universally practised were the mission and work of Christ. Earthly kingdoms are established and upheld by physical force, but this was not to be the foundation of the Messiah’s kingdom. In the establishment of his government no carnal weapons were to be used, no coercion practised; no attempt would be made to force the consciences of men. These are the principles used by the prince of darkness for the government of his kingdom. His agents are actively at work, seeking in their human independence to enact laws which are in direct contrast to Christ’s mercy and loving-kindness.” (Ellen White, August 18, 1896, *The Review and Herald*, para. 2.)

“It is no part of Christ’s mission to compel men to receive Him. It is Satan, and men actuated by his spirit, that seek to compel the conscience. Under a pretense of zeal for righteousness, men who are confederate with evil angels bring suffering upon their fellow men, in order to convert them to their ideas of religion; but Christ is ever showing mercy, ever seeking to win by the revealing of His love. He can admit no rival in the soul, nor accept of partial service; but He desires only voluntary service, the willing surrender of the heart under the constraint of love. There can be no more conclusive evidence that we possess the spirit of Satan than the disposition to hurt and destroy those who do not appreciate our work, or who act contrary to our ideas.

“Every human being, in body, soul, and spirit, is the property of God. Christ died to redeem all. Nothing can be more offensive to God than for men, through religious bigotry, to bring suffering upon those who are the purchase of the Saviour’s blood.” (*The Desire of Ages*, 487, 488.)

“The law of love being the foundation of the government of God, the happiness of all created beings depended upon their perfect accord with its great principles of righteousness. God desires from all His creatures the service of love—homage that springs from an intelligent appreciation of His character. He takes no pleasure in a forced allegiance, and to all He grants freedom of will, that they may render Him voluntary service.” (Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* [1911], 493.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

In what ways did Jesus extend religious liberty to others?

Why was it hard for the disciples to learn lessons of tolerance toward others?

What was the difference between Christ’s spirit and that of His disciples?

How did the disciples justify wanting to bring fire down on a Samaritan village?

How did the cross demonstrate Christ’s spirit?

How can we know which spirit we’re really of? How can we make sure we don’t mistakenly think we’re of Christ’s spirit when we’re actually of our culture’s spirit?

How should we relate to Christians who lack the spirit of Christ?

How can we do a better job of looking out for others’ interests?