

Seeing the World through the Eyes of Christ

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in October/November 1927)



This is an extraordinarily rich sermon that touches on a number of themes that would remain central to Bonhoeffer's theology. It was written in late fall 1927 as a requirement for his first theological examination; he delivered it in January 1928 at the Hochmeister Church in Halensee, a suburb of Berlin. Superintendent Gotthelf Bronisch gave the written sermon a passing grade, acknowledging Bonhoeffer's "intellectual energy" while noting that the sermon needed more focus and a "tight unity." (Readers can decide whether they agree). His church superintendent Max Diestel attended the service and wrote that Bonhoeffer preached "with great assurance and vitality."

Bonhoeffer begins with an extensive interpretation of the Lukan story of the conflict between Jesus’s disciples and the Samaritans, before drawing a direct analogy between those tensions and the cultural tensions that were mounting in late Weimar Germany. In language that shows a certain evangelical fervor, Bonhoeffer speaks of the frustration of Christians in late Weimar Germany at the growing secularism around them and the corresponding diminished respect for the church. He then moves, however, toward taking a critical look at the church, asking: “Are the Samaritans really on the other side of the church walls?”

Reflecting on the failures of modern Christians to truly give their lives over to God, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that Christ finds his way to us, and we are to answer in obedience and love. Acting in Christian love does not mean understanding Jesus “as a religious genius, an ethical thinker, or a philosopher, but as the Lord of death and of life; as the Word of God made flesh, for whom command and promise are the same. This is the act of Christian love that we owe everyone.” Acting in Christian love also means seeing the world through Christ’s eyes; in the process we are opened to the suffering of others, and become more aware of our own failures. Only through such love could the divisions between Samaritans and Jews in Jesus’s age—or the gulf between Christians and the world in Bonhoeffer’s time—be overcome.

There is a foretaste in this sermon of the thinking and language he would later use in his book *Discipleship*. Reading this sermon, we can understand why the sermons Bonhoeffer heard a few years later in Harlem resonated so deeply with him.



Luke 9:51–56: *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead*

of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

Our story draws us into the time of Jesus's life when he is preparing to die and is traveling down the road to Jerusalem for the final time. "His face was set toward Jerusalem." He knows the fate that awaits him at the end of the road. He knows that now everything is compelling him to make a decision.

His disciples, who are with him, know this as well. Yet they have not yet understood that Jesus's path is the path of divine love, not the path of ultimate judgment. It is evening. Once again they have come one day closer to the final battle. The thoughts of the wanderers circle feverishly around the coming events. Exhausted from the trip, the little band looks for a night's lodging. Jesus sends messengers to the nearest place. It belongs to the Samaritans. Hundreds of years of hatred lay between them and the Jews. All communication between them had been broken off. For a long time the path taken by pious pilgrims from Galilee to Jerusalem followed the eastern bank of the Jordan and bypassed Samaria in a roundabout way. Jesus, on the way to the cross, the path of compassionate love, travels along the road through Samaria, directly toward Jerusalem. We can only infer, for the text does not tell us, why Jesus took this path. But he might have talked often with his disciples about what would soon happen. He might have tried to make them understand that this path was a path of God's love among the people, that the Jews needed this love as much as the Samaritans did, and that he wanted to demonstrate

this love to the Samaritans as much as he did to the Jews. In order to witness to this conviction he may have taken this path through Samaria. This step would have obliged the disciples to exercise a great deal of self-control. Piercing, heartfelt aversion might have accompanied the small band when they arrived on Samaritan soil as the sun went down. But the disciples had conquered their inner selves. They wanted to demonstrate that they shared Jesus's spirit, and so they went with him. They wanted to prove, especially to the Samaritans, that they paid no attention to these outer battles. They wanted to travel with their Savior through Samaria. Yes, they really had conquered their inner selves. They came as human beings to human beings. This was the Master's spirit.

Night had fallen and they needed lodging. Jesus had sent several of his disciples ahead to inquire where a tired group of Jews on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem might find shelter. It was the ancient right of foreigners to ask for shelter, even in enemy territory. Jesus and his disciples waited in front of the place for news from the messengers. They return. Their motions, their stride, their face, and their eyes spew agitation and rage. "They won't accept the master. They have refused to give him shelter." Great agitation seizes the band. Angry words reach Jesus's ear. But he remains undisturbed and silent. Their rage increases. "Why have they turned him away? What did they say?" "A pilgrim on the way to Jerusalem can't find shelter in Samaria." The brothers James and John push themselves through the band toward Jesus. Their eyes are ablaze with zealous love for their Lord and with zealous wrath against anyone who would turn him away. "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus now turns around toward the voices that had spoken to him behind his back. And he warns the speakers with righteous solemnity, "You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the

lives of human beings but to save them.” Then they went on to another village.

It was only a minor incident, played out in only a few brief minutes—but what a forceful sermon for our time about the disciples’ wrath and the Savior’s mind, about the coming of Jesus Christ and his reception. It deals with the Samaritans, the angry disciples, Jesus’s harsh words about the latter, and his comforting words for the former. How does this affect us?

Let us thoroughly examine the text until the walls of the centuries that divide us from it disappear and we comprehend the timeless kernel of the story. In order to do this, we first must ask what kind of people these Samaritans actually were. According to everything thus far, we must take them for very rough and hard people. We can easily understand and sympathize with the disciples’ anger. Shouldn’t heavenly fire consume anyone who shuts the door in Jesus’s face? Yet we must pay careful attention to the text. We learn from our text not only that the Samaritans do not receive Jesus but also why—in this case because “he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” What does this mean? Their rejection apparently was not aimed particularly at Jesus but at all Jewish pilgrims and therefore Jesus as well. We don’t hear that the Samaritans knew about Jesus, let alone his true importance, or that they were personally hostile to him. Jesus is rebuffed, turned away. Why? Because he was a Jew and a member of his people. The Samaritans as a people had hostile attitudes toward the Jews as a people. They see only outward appearance, the unremarkable wrapper in which our eternal God hides from the eyes of those who see and yet don’t believe. In Jesus they see a Jew—they, the “church people”—and they draw their conclusion about the Master from this. That means that basically they don’t see Jesus at all but reject him, perhaps even reject him for that very reason. This is the kind of people the Samaritans were.

And now to the disciples. Full of great hopes and pious thoughts they followed their Lord on the path through Samaria, and now they receive this stern rejection. Oh, it didn't center on them. But their Lord, their Master—it was he who was rejected. The Samaritans showed him the door, and that deeply affected the disciples' fiery hearts. All right, if you don't want to, then go to hell! Whoever refuses to accept Jesus should be wiped off the face of the earth. That person has incurred eternal divine wrath.

Now Jesus speaks. It immediately becomes clear to us that he breaks out in wrath not at the Samaritans, but at his disciples. Those who had just heard why the Samaritans refused to accept Jesus were blind and hard-hearted enough to pass eternal judgment on a situation that was still unclear, and where the people were blind. Didn't they see that in one stroke they would have called down fire on not only the Samaritan village but also on Jesus's entire work, indeed on the whole world? Did they really misunderstand Jesus's final journey to Jerusalem so completely that they failed to realize that it was a journey of patience and love? Must Jesus leave this world so misunderstood by his inner circle? Would this be his legacy? Oh, but the disciples were burning with love and zeal for their Lord. They wanted to protect their Lord's honor at all costs. This was certainly not concealed from Jesus; but here he knew no tenderness. To love Jesus means to obey him, to walk in his spirit, and not to forget that one should be a child of that spirit. "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments" (1 John 5:3). No overdone enthusiasm! No excess emotion! Instead pay attention to the word. Be obedient! Truly honoring Jesus is not attending to and cherishing his physical life but obeying his commandment. Giving Jesus the honor he deserves means winning lives, not destroying them. Now we understand his harsh words, "But he turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of.'" Of course, it becomes

clear to us which spirit Jesus is referring to only when he contrasts the summary of his entire work among humans with the angry outburst of the disciples: “The Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.” Jesus speaks to the disciples of the spirit that preserves life, a spirit of redemption and patience that never tires, an understanding, alluring spirit. Woe unto them who act contrary to this spirit! May patience be given to those who are the focus of Jesus’s work.

Now all the facets of the picture are clear and transparent. Even the wall of the centuries that has separated us from this story has fallen. We face Jesus eye to eye. We see the Samaritans, hear the disciples. Now doesn’t this picture frighten us? Won’t we wake up? Do our ears remain deaf? Don’t we recognize our own time in this picture? Can’t we all easily find a place in this picture where we could stand?

Today also is such a day when Jesus wants to come, just as he did then. Aren’t there also today, as then, Samaritans and zealous disciples? Could they at that time have been the last of their ilk and their spirit? Is not Jesus’s arrival today very, very similar to the arrival of Jesus then? Sunday after Sunday during winter we ring the bells of the Christmas message. They sing quietly and tenderly about the stable in Bethlehem; powerfully and intensely they ring out in our big cities the word about love’s arrival. Who among us hasn’t been extraordinarily affected when they passed by the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in the evening as the bells were ringing, while the noise of the cars and streetcars, the fantastic neon signs, and the push of the crowds on their way to countless places of amusement wouldn’t let them think clearly? How incredibly lost the peal of the bells sounds in this environment! How strange and alone the house with the high tower looks! Fear and bitter pain often assail us at such a sight. Is there something like a Christmas message in the tumult of the big city? A message about the coming of the Lord Jesus?

Maybe we are filled with zeal to stand up and shout with all the power we possess, to scream into the frantic frenzy, “People, can’t you hear anything?” But who would hear it? And if some did hear it they would pass by laughing and say, “One more curiosity in the big city.” Blinded, they pass by the message of the coming of the eternal God to human beings through Jesus Christ. “It is one of many,” they say. Perhaps they glance at the people who are going to church, the church folk, and, thinking they know what is going on, pass by. The message of Jesus Christ’s coming has forced its way into the Samaritan village.

We would rise up in anger and pain. We would intervene for our rejected, despised Lord, and perhaps would call down a terrible curse on our big city, perhaps even call down heavenly fire to destroy this Babylon. None of us is a stranger to this wild, passionate, roiling pain and this boundless indignation. If they don’t want to listen, well and good; let the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah fall on them. Oh, now we begin to understand the disciples well! Perhaps we have even been active, have worked with people, have told them about Jesus, have gone about our work with the highest hope of showing them who Jesus is and how he is and what he brings and will bring—with the result being a firm no and a haughty smile. We think about the quiet, pious work of missions, not only far away in distant lands but also here in the cities. Consider the pastoral duties of ministers in urban churches. They joyfully accept all kinds of scorn, if only the Holy One, their Lord, is untouched—and their reward is cold rejection. Oh, it is not we who are important. They can laugh and ridicule us as much as they want. But how painful it is when we see how they put our Lord on the same level as us, how they ridicule him with us, and drag him through the mud. How much time have we waited in vain on people who even now only have rejecting and scornful words for the mission of Jesus Christ! “Won’t this ever end?” we ask bitterly.

We don't need any more illustrations. All of us know about this. It is the disciples' anger that flares up in us, an anger that seems so righteous and so holy. We want to condemn and to judge. We want to turn away with the wish that heavenly wrath descend and destroy. Indeed, do we really want this? Do we want to pass judgment upon those who haven't even seen yet? Do we want to pass judgment upon those who are inattentive, foolish, and superficial? It might become clear to us that with such desires and actions we prove that we have not accepted Jesus, have not felt his spirit, and have forgotten whose spirit we are descended from. We have pushed our Lord away from us with our excessive love for him and have fallen from the community of his spirit.

Serious reflection leads us to ask, Can we really be so completely without understanding for the Samaritans that we judge them so severely? Are the Samaritans really beyond the church walls? One glance at ourselves and at our church-community teaches us that things are very different from what we would perhaps want them to be. It teaches us that perhaps the game would be lost for us and the mission of Jesus Christ finished if the likes of John and James would perform the duties of their office. We not only discover these kinds of "Samaritan villages" out in the world. No, we discover them right here in our midst. It is a horrible thing to think and to say, The whole story that we heard not only took place two thousand years ago far away in the east, but also it takes place today in the hubbub of world metropolises. It is taking place over and over again in our own circles. In our midst, the story comes alive for the millionth time in the history of the world. What does that mean? What is going on?

Jesus Christ is looking for lodging. He is looking for entrance into our spirits and our hearts. Do we really understand what this means? Jesus Christ is a controlling, willful guest. He wants our hearts completely. He will not tolerate competition, even if the competition

only wants to dispute Jesus's right to the least bit of his possession. Jesus Christ is a discomfoting, imperious guest. He will rule whoever invites him in, and whoever invites Jesus in must serve him. Let us understand fully to whom we give shelter when we invite Jesus in. Do we want to take the risk of having this unusual guest? Oh yes! All of us "want" to—at least this is what we say and think. It is in this that we are different from the Samaritans. But before we speak these words too quickly, what does "want" mean? Half and half is unacceptable here. Only yes or no will do. The issue here is either to desire God completely or not at all, because whoever wants God halfway does not desire *God*. To desire God completely, however, means already to have God. Can we dare say that we desire Jesus to be our guest completely and with our whole soul? If it turns out to be the case that many of us don't want to take this risk, then there may be another way for us to be justified. We could say, "We know about Jesus Christ and have been baptized and confirmed. We have heard enough about him in every sermon on Sunday. We are certainly not blind like the Samaritans." Don't be angry if I ask one more time: Do you really know Jesus *Christ*? Do we really hear Jesus Christ knock at our door every Sunday? We might be able sincerely to answer this question with yes for certain moments and hours of our lives, but we would certainly be hesitant to answer the question with yes for the entirety our lives. I believe that we could say the following: For every one of us, Jesus Christ disappears not merely once but day after day. Either we don't even see or hear him anymore, or we still see him but our eyes have lost their ability to see that everything depends on our either accepting or rejecting him. We ignore the absolute urgency of his call. And thereby we are blind, like the Samaritans in our story, even if it is true that we still hear his call. Let us now remember the anger of the disciples, our own bitterness and indignation, and our anger that wished to destroy those who rejected us. This anger appeared to be

so righteous, so understandable, and so holy—and now look at ourselves! How fitting it is that we are terrified at this thought! In truth we don't have the slightest reason to proclaim judgment and death where ignorance and blindness rule. We who think we know and yet don't act, and they who barely know and don't act either.

If all this is clear to us and has touched our hearts, then I implore in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: let us not be alarmed by people like John and James. Instead let us examine the words of Jesus, with which he warns these men, and the final comforting words of our story: "The Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them." Comfort comes only from the one who makes it so difficult for us to offer him hospitality. He doesn't want to destroy but to preserve. He wants to capture us with everlasting love. He wants to give us sight. He desires our life, i.e., wants us to live in community with God and with him. And when we can't find our way to him, he will find the way to us. He will live in us. He will make our heart his temple. He himself will do what we are too weak to do. He has promised. He will do it.

If we have understood this and have taken it to heart, then we no longer feel the disciples' anger. It has been completely overcome and broken because we recognize our own inadequacy and our need for the love and the patience of Jesus Christ as much as anyone else. Jesus's love is our only foothold. Anger dissolves in response to its overpowering force. Love is the spirit Jesus speaks of, and it is solely from this love that we live, and it is this love that should now live in us. When we begin to doubt our own power, it is then that we place our whole trust in the eternal power and love of God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

With this a tremendous task has been given to us and, of course, the strength to fulfill it. It is to guide our thoughts and actions according to the words of Jesus, "The Son of Man did not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them." This is true for

our attitude toward those “out there” as well as to those “in here.” Let us think about the fact that we are children of the spirit of love. The act of Christian love is to save souls with alluring love and above all to manifest Jesus, the bearer of eternal divine love, so that we don’t remain ignorant and blind like those Samaritans but begin to see. The act of Christian love is to manifest Jesus not as a religious genius, an ethical thinker, or a philosopher, but as the Lord of death and of life; as the Word of God made flesh, for whom command and promise are the same. This is the act of Christian love that we owe everyone. Let us not forget that! Let us look at life today within our church and in the world. Truly, it seems from a human perspective that God would have reason enough to condemn the world. But we have just heard that God wants to save. Should we then destroy? God would be patient. Should we become impatient? God would give life. Should we kill? No! With the eyes of the alluring love of Jesus Christ let us look at our time, the suffering out there in the world and the suffering here in the church, the suffering of blindness and deafness, both here and there. We all have a bit of the Samaritans’ spirit and the disciples’ anger in us. We all live from the love of Jesus Christ and the love of his Father. May God grant that we put the disciples’ anger and the Samaritans’ spirit behind us, and carry only the Savior’s spirit within us! Then we can accept Jesus, and our anger will be overcome by Jesus’s spirit, and through this love we can become Christ to our brothers and sisters.

May the Lord open our eyes so that we may see. May the Lord open our ears so that we may hear. May the Lord open our hearts so that the Lord may find a dwelling place there. Christ speaks, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking.” We want to call out, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”