

A Holy No

Scripture Text: Luke 4:31-44

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore the necessity of saying no to some opportunities in order to say yes to others in our walks with God. A related idea will be the process of discernment by which we come to understand our callings.

Digging In

Background

Luke 4:31-44 describes events that take place early in the ministry of Jesus. From 3:23, we have learned that Jesus is around 30 years old, and we have seen him thus far being baptized (3:21-22), tempted in the wilderness (4:1-13), and preaching in his hometown of Nazareth (4:14-30). Now we see Jesus preaching in Capernaum. As with the Nazareth episode, Jesus teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Unlike the Nazareth episode, we are not told the content of Jesus' preaching. Instead, Jesus' actions are described as he exorcises demons and heals the sick. Importantly, Jesus' words in Nazareth and his actions in Capernaum should not be taken separately. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin. In Nazareth, Jesus describes his ministry by quoting from Isaiah to say, among other things, that he has come "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners" (4:18). Now, in 4:31-44, we see him doing just that as he frees people from the power of demons and sickness.

Words with Authority

While much of Jesus' Capernaum visit focuses on exorcisms and healings, it begins with a brief commentary on his teaching. According to 4:33, "They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority." A number of commentators note that the regular manner of teaching in this context was to list what other teachers had said in order to establish precedent.ⁱ By contrast, Jesus simply "declares God's will directly, even keeping direct use of Scripture to a few limited situations."ⁱⁱ In this, Jesus speaks differently than the other teachers of his day, and the people are amazed at his bold proclamation.

Exorcism

As noted in the “Background” section above, Luke focuses more in this passage on Jesus’ actions than on the content of his preaching, amazing though it is. Thus, directly after watching the people take note of Jesus, we see that they are not the only ones impressed by his presence. 4:33-34 informs us that a demon-possessed man is in the congregation and begins to scream “at the top of his voice,” “Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” This scene would be comparable to a person beginning to scream hysterically during a preacher’s sermon today, and we can imagine people transferring their attention from Jesus to the screaming man. Jesus, however, is not overcome by this surprising occurrence. Instead, he addresses the demon directly in saying, “Be quiet. Come out of him!”

using a stern voice (4:35). Having been ordered by one more powerful than itself, the demon is left with no choice but to obey. It throws the man “before them all” (but is even then unable to harm him) and then comes out without further resistance. To this point, the people have already been amazed by Jesus’ authoritative words. Now they are amazed by the “authority and power” with which he commands impure spirits (4:36). Unsurprisingly, word of this powerful teacher and exorcist begins to spread (4:37).

Why Silence Good Press?

In the stories of exorcisms in 4:31-44, we see Jesus passing on the chance for good publicity.

Why silence demons when they name him the “Holy One of God” (4:34) and “Son of God”? David Garland answers this question in saying, “Jesus rebukes ... and suppresses their confession because he does not want or need demonic testimony.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Healing

After leaving the synagogue, Jesus retires to Simon’s house. At this point in Luke’s gospel, Simon has not yet received the call to discipleship, and we see that he knows Jesus before receiving the call (in contrast to Mark’s gospel, where Jesus calls the disciples with no former contact). Upon entering the house, Jesus learns that “Simon’s mother-in-law [is] suffering from a high fever,” and he is asked to help her (4:38). In response to this request, Jesus “rebuke[s] the fever.” Once again, we see the power of Jesus’ word as the fever is overcome. Twice now Jesus has effectively proclaimed “freedom for the captives,” first in regard to demon possession and second in regard to sickness.^{iv} Now healed of her sickness, Simon’s mother-in-law gets up and begins to serve Jesus and the others in the house. In doing so, “she serves as a pattern for all who would subsequently be delivered by Jesus’ word and then express their gratitude through serving...”^v

The Coming of the Crowds

In 4:37, we saw that “news about him spread throughout the surrounding area.” Apparently, those who attended the synagogue earlier in the day took news of Jesus home with them. Now, as the sun sets, thereby bringing the Sabbath to a close, people bring the sick to Jesus for healing. They have delayed until sunset because Sabbath restrictions kept them from doing so earlier.^{vi} Even so, it may be that they are bending the rules in their haste. Garland argues that “at sunset” should be translated “as the sun was setting” and that this alternate translation “suggests the townspeople’s impatience to get their sick to Jesus without delay.”^{vii} Rather than waiting for the sun to set completely, the people begin moving before the Sabbath is fully complete. In response, Jesus lays his hands on the sick and heals them. He also casts out demons.

Refusal to Stay

The scene now shifts to “a solitary place” (4:42) to which Jesus withdrew at daybreak. Interestingly, Luke gives no reason for Jesus’ withdrawal, though perhaps it was for prayer (Mark 1:35 names prayer as Jesus’ objection when telling this same story; Luke 5:16 tells us that “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”). Regardless of Jesus’ reason for withdrawing, the people come looking for him and, upon finding him, try “to keep him from leaving them.” In light of the previous day, this drive to keep Jesus in Capernaum is no surprise. After all, it is no stretch to say that Capernaum has benefited from Jesus’ presence. In the span of a single Sabbath day, they have heard him teach with authority, seen him exorcise a demon, and then watched him respond compassionately to the town’s sick by healing them and to the town’s demon possessed by freeing them from oppression. Jesus is the kind of person that you want to have around!

In response, Jesus refuses their request. With an amazing sense of personal purpose, he says, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” Because Jesus knows what God has called him to be about,^{viii} he is able to resist opportunities outside God’s plan. Thus we hear that “he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea” (4:44).

Application

A Holy No

While application for this passage can move in several directions (Jesus’ example of compassion, exploring Jesus’ mission), this lesson will focus specifically on his refusal to stay in Capernaum when given the chance. In refusing to stay, Jesus displays the important ability to say no to some opportunities in order to say yes to others. As Jesus’

disciples, we also are faced with decisions of this sort, and it is important for us to learn to exercise what might be called a “holy no” for the sake of pursuing our own callings. The discussion below will seek to explore God’s call on the lives of his people, dealing first with broad calls that apply to all Christians and moving then to the more individual callings on our lives.

The Call to Holiness

Perhaps the best place to begin talking about the call of God is in regard to the call to holiness. Often when we consider God’s will, we focus on big decisions like taking new jobs, getting married, or moving. While these are valid points for consideration (which will be addressed in a subsequent section), they can sometimes mask the reality that God is not only interested in the big decisions of our lives, but also in the nitty-gritty realities of everyday living. Thus, when Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment, he answers, “The most important one is this ... ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’” (Mark 12:29-30). As Jesus speaks of loving God, he doesn’t just focus on the big decisions of life. Instead, he calls us to love God with all that we are. This will certainly include the big decisions of life, but it also includes so much more. As Jesus speaks the greatest commandment, he calls us to devote every aspect of our lives (heart, soul, mind, and strength) to the love of God, and this is a call that is issued to all Christians.

But what does it mean to love God with all that we are? One important aspect of this all-encompassing love of God is our commitment to holiness. At root, holiness is a matter of being set apart for God’s purposes. In this sense, Christians are holy simply because they are God’s people, having been set apart by his grace. On another level, though, those who have been set apart are expected to act in ways “befitting those so separated.”^{ix} Holiness, then, is a status that Christians enjoy because God has set them apart and also a calling they receive to act appropriately. Thus, to commit ourselves to holiness is to commit ourselves to living lives that are pleasing to God. This is a matter of the individual actions that we pursue and also a matter of our characters, which are being shaped through the work of the Holy Spirit. This in mind, how might a “holy no” become necessary as we pursue the call to holiness?

First, because holiness has to do with our actions, we will need to exercise “holy no’s” in regard to sinful activities. Because we are God’s holy people who are set apart for his purposes, we must choose to avoid those things that displease him. Second, as we walk with God, we say no to things that inhibit our spiritual growth. Importantly, these things are not always sinful. To use the analogy of diet, we can avoid foods that are bad for our bodies (think here of avoiding sin), but we can then go a step further to choosing good foods that will make us healthier (think here of encouraging spiritual growth). At this point in a diet, we become purposeful in the way that we eat, saying no to foods that aren’t necessarily bad in order to eat foods that are better. While the call

to avoid sin will look the same as it is lived out by different Christians because we're all avoiding the same things, the call to encourage spiritual growth will look different as the Spirit meets us and molds us in different ways and at different paces. In this light, one person may say no to staying up late in order to say yes to an early morning quiet time. At the same time, another person may say no to television at a certain point during the day in order to say yes to a similar time of prayer and study. Likewise, one person might say no to television for forty days in order say yes to deepening her prayer life, while another might say no lunch on Thursdays to devote that time to the same purpose. All of these people are pursuing spiritual growth, but they are doing so in different ways. As we consider holy no's in regard to holiness, we follow the Spirit's lead in saying no to some aspects of life that are fine for others in order to say yes to the growth that the Spirit wants to accomplish within us.

The Call to Service

Another call that is universal to Christian experience is the call to service, and the Spirit once again plays a prominent, though different, role. Whereas the Spirit *forms* us for holiness, the Spirit *gifts* us for service. The apostle Paul captures this idea when he says, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." (1 Cor 11:4-7). In these verses, we see that all Christians are gifted in some way to contribute to the good of the Church as a whole. To further explain this idea, Paul often employs the image of a body (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor 12:12-31, Eph 4:16). According to this image, the members of the church, like a body, are united but also diverse in function. Once again, the idea is that the Church functions as designed when we all exercise our God-given gifts in service of the whole. Among the gifts listed in the NT (and these are not necessarily the only gifts of the Spirit) are prophecy, service, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues, apostleship, evangelism, and pastoring (see the lists found in Rom 12:6-8, 1 Cor 12:8-10, Eph 4:11). According to the scriptures, each Christian has been given at least one of these gifts to be exercised in service on behalf of the whole. So how does a "holy no" make us better able to serve?

When it comes to serving in the local church, it can sometime feel like there aren't enough hands to do everything that needs to be done. When this is the case, it often happens that a few people will take on too much or serve outside of their giftings in order to keep things running. While the willingness to serve in this way is admirable, doing so often proves harmful to both the individual and to the church as a whole. Individually, too much or ungifted service takes its toll in unhappiness and burnout. Corporately, people are allowed to sit back and let others work rather than stepping up to the plate themselves. Ideally, the each person in the church should serve in a way that is both joyful and sustainable. "Holy no's" are therefore necessary when it comes to

service opportunities in the church. Like Jesus, who was presented with the opportunity to serve as Capernaum's resident teacher and healer, we must sometimes say no to opportunities outside of our callings and giftings in order to say yes to those that are inside that space. In this, we guard ourselves both from doing too much and from doing the wrong things.

Life Choices

As we have seen, the calls to holiness and service are universal to Christian experience. Now we move to the more specific "big decisions" that are unique to each of our lives. How do "holy no's" function here?

To begin, it is important to say that the answers to such big decisions will not always be no. If an opportunity stands up to the standard of holiness (meaning that it does not lead us to displease God), it may be that God is leading us in a new direction. At the same time, just because an opportunity becomes available doesn't necessarily mean that it is God's will. Once an opportunity has passed the holiness standard, the time for discernment has arrived. Though Luke does not tell us how he came to understand himself as traveling preacher (Luke 4:43), Jesus has definitely discerned his call from God, and it is from a place of confident discernment that he is able to exercise a "holy no" when faced with the Capernaum opportunity. In effect, he says no to this opportunity in order to say yes to another.

Discerning the Call

While we may affirm all that has gone before, we sometimes come to places where confusion rules the day. When it comes to holiness, not all decisions are black and white, and we sometimes wonder what is right. In regard to service, we may struggle to understand how God has gifted us. Likewise, when it comes to life choices, we may find ourselves scratching our heads and wondering how we are to go about discerning God's will. What are we to do when we can't yet function from a center of discernment like Jesus does in Luke 4:43-44?

As noted in the "Digging In" section, Luke does not tell us why Jesus withdrew to a solitary place at daybreak. Possible explanations might include a desire for prayer or space. While we can't be sure that either of these were Jesus' intent from Luke's text, we can affirm them as helpful practices for God's people. When the time for discernment comes, withdrawing for a time of prayer does two things. First, it provides space to think and meditate. Second, it allows us opportunity to put the question to God and listen for his response. Space and prayer can become avenues for our hearing the whisper of God.

In our individualistic culture, it is important to note that discernment only an individual process. Though personal prayer is indispensable, we should also remember that we are surrounded by God's people, some of whom can offer insights we have

missed as we seek to discern God's will. The practice of seeking the counsel of other Christians comes into stark focus when we remember that some have been given the gift of wisdom, the very thing we seek in times of discernment! All this in mind, it is appropriate for us to seek the counsel and support of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In doing so, we may find God speaking through his people (as he often does) to bring clarity to our callings.

Teaching Helps

Tip: Because the bulk of the application for this section comes after the story, it will be important to be sure to move through the story at a good pace to leave time for discussion of other points.

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "If you were a cartoon character, which one would you be?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.^x

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of Luke that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will come from Thursday's reading and will focus on Luke 4:31-44. Invite students to open their Bibles to that passage.

Discussing the Story

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 4:31-32.
 - **Question:** Why do you think that the people were amazed by Jesus' teaching? (For more on this, see the "Words with Authority" section above.)
 - **Question:** Have you ever had a time when you were amazed by a person's teaching? Describe the experience.
 - It may be good here for the teacher to have a story of his/her own about being amazed by a teaching.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 4:33-37.
 - **Question:** This scene would have been like a person beginning to scream hysterically in the middle of a worship service. What do you think it would have been like to be in the synagogue when the demon-possessed man began shouting at Jesus?
 - **Question:** What would you have thought when Jesus cast the demon out?

- **Question:** What is the people's reaction to Jesus?
- **Summarize:** Explain that after the scene at the synagogue, Jesus retired from public view to Simon's house and healed Simon's mother-in-law.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 4:40-41.
 - **Question:** The text says that people began coming to Jesus at sunset. Why do you think they waited until then?
 - **Explain:** Explain that people waited for the Sabbath to finish at sunset. (For more on this, see "The Coming of the Crowds" Section above.)
 - **Question:** What do you think that it would have been like to see Jesus healing and casting out demons on this night?
 - **Question:** If you were from Capernaum, what would be your impression of Jesus after this day?
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 4:42-44.
 - **Question:** Why do you think Jesus withdrew to a solitary place? (For more on this, see the "Refusal to Stay" section above.)
 - **Question:** Would it have been a bad thing for Jesus to stay in Capernaum?
 - **Question:** Why does Jesus refused to stay?
 - **Question:** How do you think Jesus became so confident about his mission to preach in the surrounding towns?

A Holy No

- **Question:** In the passage today, Jesus said no to one opportunity in order to say yes to another. Would anyone like to share an experience when they said no to something in order to say yet to something else?
- **Explain:** Explain that we are going to call Jesus' no a "holy no" because he said no to staying in Capernaum in order to stay true to his call from God. Like Jesus, there are times when we are called to exercise "holy no's" on our faith journeys in order to stay true to our own callings from God.
- **The Call to Holiness**
 - **Question:** How would you define holiness.
 - **Explain:** Drawing from the "The Call to Holiness" section above, explain holiness to the class as both a position and call to right action.
 - **Question:** When do you think that we might need to exercise a "holy no" in order to stay true to our callings to holiness?
 - **Explain:** Drawing from the "The Call to Holiness" section above, explain that we must say no to sin and also to things that inhibit our spiritual growth.
 - **Question:** Has anyone ever given up something that wasn't sinful in order to deepen their walk with God?
 - It may be good here for the teacher to have a personal example ready.

- **Explain:** Using the diet illustration from the “The Call to Holiness” section, explain that we sometimes exercise “holy no’s” in ways unique to our own spiritual walks in order to pursue a deeper walk with the Spirit.
- **The Call to Service**
 - **Question:** Can anyone explain the idea of spiritual gifts?
 - **Explain:** If no one supplies the right answer, explain spiritual gifts using the “The Call to Service” section above.
 - **Question:** Ask the class to name spiritual gifts.
 - Write answers on the board. Using the “The Call to Service” section above, fill out the list with gifts that the class missed.
 - **Explain:** Highlight again that all Christians are gifted for service to the church.
 - **Question:** When might we need to exercise “holy no’s” in regard to service opportunities at church?
 - **Explain:** Draw from the “The Call to Service” section above to answer this question.
- **Life Choices**
 - **Question:** Has anyone ever faced a big life decision and wondered about God’s will?
 - **Explain:** Explain that we may sometimes need to exercise “holy no’s” in regard to life decisions, even some that are good opportunities. (See “Life Choices” section above for more on this.)
- **Discernment**
 - **Explain:** Explain that we are sometimes not as sure about our callings as Jesus was in this passage. (See “Discerning the Call” section above for more on this.)
 - **Question:** When we aren’t sure of our callings, how can we become sure? (See “Discerning the Call” section above for more on this.)
 - **Question:** Can anyone share an experience of receiving discernment through prayer?
 - **Explain:** Explain that we often jump to prayer when we think of discernment and forget that we are surrounded by God’s people, who can help us discern our callings.
 - **Illustration:** Ask if anyone has ever wondered what their spiritual gift might be. Choosing a person who raises their hand (this person will need to be familiar to the class), ask the class to name gifts that they see in this person.
 - **Explain:** Sometimes God’s people can help us in our process of discernment.
- **Explain:** Explain that as we discern our callings, we can better exercise “holy no’s.”

Closing Question: Is there anything from this lesson that you think is especially important to take home?

ⁱ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text--to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 146–147; Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, vol. 10 (Zondervan, 2007), 110; R. Allen Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 110.

ⁱⁱ Bock, *Luke*, 147.

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Luke*, vol. 3, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan,, 2011), 217.

^{iv} Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” 110–111.

^v *Ibid.*, 111.

^{vi} Garland, *Luke*, 3:217; Liefeld and Pao, “Luke,” 113.

^{vii} Garland, *Luke*, 3:217.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 3:218. “The passive voice, ‘I was sent’ ... reveals Jesus’ sense of divine commission...”

^{ix} Both definitions of holiness taken from: W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., “Holiness, Holy, Holily,” *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 307.

^x Question taken from: “Funny Icebreaker Questions,” *Buzzle*, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/funny-icebreaker-questions.html>.