

# Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International

(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



## Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):  
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

## Luke 9:51-62

Year C - Proper 8, Text: Luke 9:51-62

Year C - Proper 8, Text: Luke 9:51-62

Jesus faced constant political pressure as He carried out His ministry. He resisted any move to make him a king. Although He came to establish a kingdom, that kingdom was completely different from anything the world could devise or establish. It was an upside-down Kingdom. There is reason to believe that Jesus used Capernaum as His base so that He could rapidly slip across the Jordan into the territory of Philip, who was less brutal than Herod Antipas (who ruled Galilee and Perea) and less likely to harm Him.

**Verse 9:51** reads: “When the days drew near for Jesus to be received up, He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This marks a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Although He was born in Bethlehem and presented in the Temple when eight days old, Jesus kept away from Jerusalem during His ministry.

Jerusalem played the role of the city of opposition, the city of His enemies. Its political and religious leaders were opposed to His Person and ministry, and they would eventually spearhead the move to do away with Him. Hence, when Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, He knew that he was going to His death (v.13:33–35).

**Verse 9:52-53:** Those whom Jesus sent ahead to prepare the way went first to a village of the Samaritans. However, the Samaritans would not allow Jesus and His disciples to pass through their territory since He was heading for Jerusalem. They insisted that the only legitimate place for worship and offering was Mount Gerizim in Samaria, not Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The Samaritan refusal was a religious protest.

**Verses 9:54–56:** Jesus rejected any notion of punishing the Samaritans for their attitude (see also John 4).

### *Following Jesus: Three Examples (9:57-62)*

Soon after Jesus changes course, He encounters three men. The first offers to follow Him. Jesus calls the second to follow Him. And the third offers to follow Jesus with a certain proviso. These three encounters contain statements that initially mystify western readers.

**Verses 9:57–58:** As they were traveling, someone says to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus says to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

This first person expresses a willingness to follow Jesus, but has not considered the cost. His understanding is shallow. Jesus might well have said: It is easy to make big promises if you think that only little is involved. You wish to go with Me wherever I go? Good! But understand that I can offer you no salary, no benefits package, and no retirement plan. I myself do not even own a bed to sleep on, and I cannot promise you one, either. What goes for Me must go for you as well!

But Jesus does not say that. Rather, He answers with remarkable but powerful brevity: “Foxes have dens, birds have roosts, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” It is not obvious, but Jesus is speaking here in code.

The term “fox” was a symbol of the Ammonites, who, were viewed as enemies of Israel. Similarly, the family of Herod the Great (Idumeans, descendants of the Edomites) was racially mixed. First century Palestinians would have understood the implications of Jesus’ comment. In Luke 13:32, Jesus refers to Herod Antipas as “that fox” (Luke 13:32). Also “Birds of the air” is used in intertestamental literature for the Gentile nations.

The sense is: “Everybody is at home in Israel except the true Israel. The birds of the air (Roman overlords) and the foxes (Edomite interlopers) hold power, but the true Israel is disinherited by them. So, if you throw in your lot with Me, you join the ranks of the dispossessed and must serve God under these conditions.”

The call to follow a rejected, suffering Son of Man would have come as a shock to a first century Jew. After all, the Jewish people believed that they would one day attain ascendancy over the nations of the world, and those nations would serve them forever.

We might sum up Jesus’ statement as: If you want power and influence, follow the fox that manages his affairs with cunning. Go to the birds that feather their nests. Do

you really want to follow the rejected Son of Man?

We are not told the man's response. In every age, there are those who glibly commit to following Jesus without reflecting on the cost of following a rejected Lord.

**Verses 9:59–60:** To the second man, Jesus says, "Follow me." He responds, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." This man does not offer his services to Jesus. Rather, Jesus seeks to recruit him with, "Follow me."

The man responds, "Lord let me first go and bury my father." The response is often misunderstood. Some think the father has just died or is about to die, and the man seeks a little time to attend to his burial. This is not what is meant. If it were so, even from a common-sense point of view, we would have to ask, "If his father has recently died, why is he not back there taking care of family and funeral affairs?"

What he is really saying is, "Let me go and serve my father. My first obligation is to my father" (while he remains alive). After he dies I will bury him — and then I will be free to follow You." He wants to defer following Jesus to a distant future point in time when his father will die as an old man — but who knows when?

This man's response reflects an attitude still prevalent in the Middle East: A son has a duty to remain at home until his father dies. Only then can he pursue other options. What is at stake is peer pressure. "Surely you do not expect me to violate the expectations of my community?"

**Verse 9:61:** A third man said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at home." This man offers to follow Jesus, but with a precondition. His request seems fair. Who would not want to say goodbye to loved ones prior to taking up a new mission? But this is not the issue. The verb "take leave of" implies getting family permission.

Again, across the Middle East still today, the one who leaves asks permission to go. For example, an engineer in his forties will go from the large city where he is working to his village birthplace to get his father's permission to undertake foreign travel, a job change, or a business venture. Although the granting of permission is ceremonial, a sign of respect is involved. Little wonder, then, that many in the Middle East are shocked when they learn that Jesus' claim on people supersedes the claim of family — and that Jesus made this claim when He was only about thirty years old!

The one who wants to greet his family has his heart tied to his family, where his father's authority is supreme. He is saying, "I will follow you, Lord, but the authority of my father is higher than yours. I must have his permission first!" Everyone listening knows that the father will refuse the son permission to wander off on some questionable enterprise.

**Verse 9:62:** Jesus responds, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Here, Jesus draws on farming practices in the Palestine of His day. Then, as now, the plow is of light construction. The plowman uses his left hand to hold the plow, to regulate the depth of cut, and to lift it over rocks and stones. With his right hand, he directs his unruly ox out front, using a six-foot goad tipped with an iron spike to do so. He must also look between the hindquarters of the ox to make sure that the furrow he's plowing will be straight. If he lets himself be distracted, the result will be a crooked furrow.

In the Middle East, getting seed into the ground involves four plowings. First, big furrows are made to break up the soil. Second, smaller furrows are made to provide proper drainage. Third, close-set furrows are plowed, without intervening bands. The seed is then sown by hand. Finally, the seed sown by hand is covered.

The plowman must give undivided attention to the task at hand. If he lets himself get distracted, the plow might catch on a rock and perhaps break the plow blade in the process. Distraction might also result in plowing previously plowed soil and destroying the field's drainage system or its potential to absorb water. It might also expose newly planted seed to birds.

### *The Central Point of the Parable*

The Talmud states that a father and his son, or a master and his disciple, are regarded as one individual. The issue at stake in the trio of encounters is the nature of the relationship that Jesus wants to exist between Himself as Master and Teacher, and His disciples and students. Jesus insists that loyalty to His Kingdom supersedes all other loyalties, including loyalty to family.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not "signing up for the course" to get a little information. It is the cementing of a lifelong relationship to a Person. Jesus' authority takes precedence over all other relationships. The person who always wants to look back over the shoulder to check on family or other whims is judged useless in the kingdom of God. Jesus' message is, "Eyes out front! Eyes on Me — and on no one else! Follow Me full-time!"