

In-your-face preaching: Sunday, October 8, Luke 17:5-10

by [Mark Harris](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

Jesus is reported to have said, “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force” (Luke 16:16). This might also be read, “The law and the prophets reigned until John, but now we are confronted with the preaching of God’s reign, and people demand to be part of it.”

Jesus just won’t let go. Over and over again in Luke’s long narrative of Jesus’ interactions on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus persists in his effort to make us squarely face the fact that it is the reign of God that he is proclaiming and confronting us with—not the reign of human perfectibility or even life under the law. He pushes and pushes against every excuse, every modification and every “weasel way” out of that confrontation we can invent.

And it *is* a confrontation, for as long as the reign of God is equated with perfectibility we can think that we can be part of the action if only we are righteous enough. We can also believe that we are better than “they.” Being better than someone is a comfort, while confronting what has colorfully been called our “total depravity” is no comfort at all.

Preaching the reign of God is not preaching the law and the prophets, but then it is not preaching contrary to them either. Preaching the reign of God is a “not this, not that” preaching. We would like this: to have God’s justice rain down on the world, but have God’s mercy fall on us. We would like that: to have the world be a more just place and ourselves forgiven. But what we have in Jesus’ parables and stories is more than these. The reign of God is not only more justice, more mercy, but something new.

Jesus’ in-your-face remarks in response to the apostles’ plea to “increase our faith” are wonderful examples of his teaching dynamic. The apostles are asking for more—more insight, more understanding, more depth of belief. But Jesus’ first comment pushes his followers in a different direction: if you had any faith at all you could do impossible things—so it’s not that you need more faith, you need *any faith*.

His second comment pushes his followers in the other direction: You are to be faithful in what you do, but there will be no special reward. You are just doing what you are supposed to be doing, so don't think that a greater understanding of what faithful service is about will get you greater reward.

Yet here we are: we could use *some* faith, and it would be nice to be rewarded for work well done. Jesus doesn't let up. It is difficult for me to see today's reading as good news—not if the headlines read, “Citizen Mark has no faith, demands better pay anyway.” How in the world then do I have any chance at all of being part of God's people or feeling appreciated? Where is the good news in Jesus' resounding No?

Strangely, this reading becomes good news as we realize that it doesn't let us off the hook. It is finally a relief to know that reading one more book, contemplating one more pithy saying, meditating on one more piece of scripture, doing one more good deed—none of these is going to make the difference. It is finally a relief to know that my reward is not going to be greater if I think of God as a boss who will be somehow gratified that I did what I was supposed to do. It is a relief not to have to spend time worrying about these things.

If we are no longer caught up in such worries, and if we know that this preaching of the reign of God is “not this, not that” preaching, maybe we are ready to jump on the train, to take the leap toward the “what is” of God's reign. If the reign of God is not gotten to by having more faith, or by doing good works, how do we get to it?

In our better moments we Christians believe that God has joined mercy and justice in compassion, in the person of someone new in this world. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the dream of the writer of Psalm 85, who says that “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (KJV). Jesus is called “God with us” and through the ages has been seen as the guarantor of our belief that the same God who demands justice also will show mercy.

The reign of God is a reign of compassion in which we are to participate. As we practice compassion, we are not to gather rewards for our service, but to see our service as bringing in that compassionate reign. Our struggles to do this will in no way hinder us, even if we fail.

We will be free from contending to be more of something (faith-filled), free from contending to be better and therefore deserving of reward—and we can practice

loving-kindness and make Christ real in this day and time. Jesus and his in-your-face preaching leaves us nowhere else to go. In the end, we run pushing and shoving to jump on that train that is bound for glory.