

If you ask me, the entire text before us is rather depressing. All the characters in the story are taking a test. The test of discipleship; what it means to follow Jesus. And at the end of the day when everyone is given a grade, using the pass/fail system, it's pretty apparent that they all fail. They're all a bunch of flunkies.

Now the last two to take the test show promise. Jesus even invites them to follow Him. Yet their "but's" get in the way. They both offer up excuses. Good excuses at that. But when anyone offers an excuse for why he or she cannot follow Jesus, no matter how good the excuse, that person has just failed the most important test in life.

The first one to take the test is all excited about taking it. "*I will follow you wherever you go!*" he says with enthusiasm. Yet it's obvious that this one has not studied for the test even one lick. He has no clue how difficult the test will be. And Jesus points this out to him. "*Foxes have holes...*" and so forth. The man fails even before he attempts to answer the first question.

We see a Samaritan village in our text. Not only do they refuse to follow Jesus, they do not even allow Him to spend the night in their town. But then we see James and John taking the test. Now these are two of Jesus' best students. "Teacher's pets" some would call them. Yet they fail with all the rest. Jesus turns around and actually rebukes them to their faces. How humiliating!

Yep, this entire story, from start to finish, is pretty depressing. But maybe it's because what we see here in our text we see just as much in our own day, and in our own lives. For example, can you even try to guess how many times pastors hear excuses from their members? And like the last two in our text, some of the excuses pastors hear are pretty good. But at the end of the day, they're just excuses. At the end of the day, when you and I place our heads on the pillow, do we tell God why we were excused that day from hearing His words of life in church, or from reading His words of life in our Bible? Or do we confess to Him, "Lord, I have sinned this day. I am a poor excuse of a disciple. Please forgive me and help me to do better."

We see the first one to take the test, here in our text, in our day also. There are those today who are all enthused about discipleship. But they don't know what it really means to follow Jesus. They sign up and show up for this and that around church, even with zeal and enthusiasm. But when it comes to what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus, to faithfully sit, listen, and absorb the words of Christ, and then reflect on His words through the week, well that's not as exciting to them, and not all that productive to their way of thinking.

Also in our day we see the Samaritan village of our text. These people are everywhere, even in our own families. People who have no use for Jesus. The last thing they would do on a Sunday morning is to receive Jesus here in His house.

But then also we see James and John in our day. They're usually in God's house. And they have no use for Samaritans and those who act like them; people who live like pagans, who refuse Jesus.

Yep, things today are as depressing as in our text. Is there a bright spot anywhere? Is there someone, anyone who truly is a good and faithful follower? Yes, there is one, but only one. And that one is Jesus. He faithfully follows the road to Jerusalem and to the cross. Our text tells us that His face was set on going there.

Everyone else in our text is a failure. And isn't that why Jesus sets His face to go to Jerusalem and to the cross? He goes there not to show everyone else how to be a faithful follower, but to die on the cross for everyone who fails at following Him.

And this includes you and me. If we find comfort in how we follow Jesus, we have utterly failed the test of discipleship. Our comfort is in Jesus alone. In how He faithfully followed the road to the cross for us.

God does not give letter grades when it comes to following Jesus. His is the pass/fail system. And all have failed. "*There is none who does good,*" He says. Everyone has "*fallen short.*" Yet far too many people, even church members, think, "I may not be an A student, but as long as I get at least a D minus in following Jesus, I'll pass the test." Oh no. They're wrong. And we're wrong if we look to our efforts at how we're doing at passing the test.

Instead, look to your baptism into Christ. There you are covered with Him, with His innocence. There is His perfection for you. In your baptism you lay claim to the perfect score Jesus won for you. Everything He did to purchase salvation for all sinners is given to you in your baptism.

Life is depressing, very depressing, when Jesus is not at the center. And He is not at the center when we focus on the letter grade we should be awarded for following Him. No. We are all failures. We are all worthless sinners.

But at the end of the day, you are and remain one who is baptized into Christ. One whose sins are forgiven. No buts about it. They are all forgiven. You are all forgiven.

You see, Jesus offered up no excuses as to why He could not follow the road to the cross. God does not excuse you, therefore; He forgives you. Think about that the next time you are tempted to give an excuse to God. He will not accept your excuse. Not today, and not on Judgment Day. But He does accept Jesus' sufferings, death, and resurrection for you. Your excuses will not save you. But Jesus does. Amen.