



0-1 This picture delighted us as soon as we saw it. It is one of several self-portraits drawn by a girl named Layla. It made us glad that she was able to see how she had many moods and they were all her. This is her sassy mood.

2. Be Sassy (Luke 5:1-11)

1. Then it happened that a crowd was pressing in around him in order to hear the word of God, and he was standing along the banks of Lake Gennesaret, **2.** and he saw a couple boats lying on the shore, but the fishermen, had left to go clean their nets. **3.** Getting into one of the boats that happened to be Simon's, he asked for a little push out from the shore. Then, sitting down in the boat he taught the crowd. **4.** When he ended his talk, he said to Simon: "Push out into the deep end and toss your nets out for a catch. **5.** In response, Simon said: "Master: throughout the whole night we were toiling, but we didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let down the nets." **6.** Doing this, they netted so many fish that the nets started to tear. **7.** So they waved to their friends in the other boat to come and help. They came and filled both boats until they started to sink. **8.** Seeing all this, Simon Peter fell to Jesus' knees, saying: "Go away from me, for I'm a sinful man, Lord. **9.** For he was astounded by the haul of fish they'd taken in, **10.** and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were business partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon: "Don't be afraid: from now on you will be catching people." **11.** After bringing the boats to shore, they left everything behind and followed him.

Main Point: Jesus teaches with an authority that does not depend on power or official status, but instead is based on connection to deep spiritual truth, one that inspires his followers to boldness rather than a spirit of fear.

Jesus on the Sea of Galilee, calling his first disciples, is among the most vivid and relatable accounts of Jesus as *one of the guys*. Imagine that day. The smells of sea and drying fish brush past the nostrils, carried by an afternoon breeze. Ragtag fishermen are joking with each other as they carry on their daily routine. Jesus playfully jumps into Peter's boat and pushes out a bit. This isn't the Jesus of the old stilted movies or of Sunday School clip art. This is a lively and even daring scene. It is *daring* because it inspires disciples to a sort of sassiness, by which we mean a boldness that arises when we are confident about a radical message and movement.

Sometimes, when we speak with young people, we ask what they think when they hear the word "boldness." Too often, we learn that they think of boldness as a negative quality, especially in the minds of young women who have been taught to defer to male leaders. What's more, "sassy" is often viewed in authoritarian communities as one of the worst character traits. It's associated with someone who has not yet been fully tamed by the system.

Nonetheless, Jesus' unique ability to teach *sincerely* and with authority ironically led to a style that wasn't as *serious* as that of the Pharisees who criticized him. Because of his confidence in the support and love of God, whom he called Father, Jesus was able to teach people in ways

that seemed irreverent. Yet it wasn't irreverent; it was a sign of spiritual fearlessness that comes with true faith. He invited his followers to follow him and share his confidence.

According to the Oxford dictionary, *sassy* can be defined as: "Lively, bold, and full of spirit; cheeky." Does your experience with religious people and organizations reflect those words? If not, someone somewhere is missing out on an important aspect of Jesus' way. It's too bad that many people who grew up in deeply religious contexts were often taught to be servile, frightened into obedience, but never taught to assert their own personalities. This is a bummer, since as soon as someone understands the authority and boldness that Jesus offers, a certain spiritual "cheekiness" naturally arises. This playful spirit is the mark of a true saint. Good humor is a sign of spiritual and emotional well-being. This spiritual maturity leads to *boldness*.

What is boldness? Think of boldness as confident words and actions that flow from a person who knows that, ultimately, they have nothing to fear. Boldness is a bit like courage, and sometimes courage is considered a synonym. But consider this important distinction: while courage is brave action in the face of fear, boldness is fearless action. It comes when we realize that the little anxieties and dramas of life are nothing compared to the ultimate grandeur of existence. It arises when we know who we are and know that, even if thieves can steal our stuff and bullies can hurt our bodies, nothing can touch our true beloved selves.

An example might help here. Imagine that you are packing up after renting a beach house with your family. Suppose that, after gathering your things and putting away the dishes, everyone heads out the front door. You lock up and put the key in a locked box out front. Suppose, however, that you accidentally left your phone charging on the kitchen counter. It's a holiday and the rental company isn't answering their office line. You've got a flight later that afternoon and really need your phone for work. So, you decide on a daring plan: you will use a credit card to break into the side door. As you break in, you're afraid of getting caught and having to explain yourself to a police officer. Nevertheless, you overcome your fear and retrieve your phone. All is well. You were courageous.

But now imagine a different scenario. Suppose you stayed at a beach house owned by your parents. You were celebrating your birthday there with friends while your folks were on vacation in Europe. Nothing broke. Everything got cleaned up. All seemed well until, as in the previous scenario, after locking the door behind you, you realize that your phone is on the counter charging.

Breaking into the side door with a credit card, a security guard spots you and asks you what's going on. Unperturbed, you explain that this is your family vacation home. In this situation, you are unafraid because you realize that, ultimately, the security guard works for your family. The guard makes a couple calls, and after confirming your identity, lets you in with a universal key used by the management company. In this scenario, you acted with confidence not by overcoming your fear but because you realized you had nothing to be afraid of. This second scenario is analogous to the spiritual boldness of Jesus and his disciples.

**Jesus' authority
trumps every
other religious
authority in your
life. So be bold.**

Jesus offers a spirit of boldness that is based on the idea that a person with the unconditional love of heaven ultimately has nothing to lose. Why? Because that person realizes that even in meekness, they are heirs to the whole world. Jesus provides a bigger perspective from which to view the little troubles that sometimes threaten to throw us off our game.

There's an important application here. In the context of potential spiritual abuse, every follower of Jesus should keep something important in mind: Jesus' authority trumps every religious authority in your life. The Apostle Paul taught this too: "But even if we [apostles] or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!" (Galatians 1:8). In other words, as important as religious authorities are, if they teach or ask you to do something that goes against the way of Jesus, they aren't just to be ignored, you are encouraged to oppose them.

Religious communities would be much healthier on average, and would be much less likely to foster abuse, if they committed to teaching young people to cultivate a sassiness that is based on the idea that by following the truth, even the people with the lowest standing in the community can challenge those leaders with the highest standing. Most of us have never met an angel or an apostle, but you can imagine the most important person in your religious community or social group. If they were standing beside, say, the ghost of the Apostle Paul and the archangel Michael, that important person in your life would suddenly seem less important. Now imagine if Paul, Michael, and the biggest authority in your world all told you to do something you think is wrong or think something you believe is false. In such a case, Jesus gives you the authority to ignore them. He gives you the highest authority over your beliefs and actions. That's powerful. It's also potentially threatening to the powers that be. That's why the powers that be rarely remind us of this implication of Jesus' teaching.

Far from The Cosmopolitan Center

An interesting thing about our globe is how different life can be when we compare rural living to the life of a big cosmopolitan center like London, New York, Shanghai, or Istanbul. Sometimes, people from smaller towns feel that they are less important because of the humble nature of their hometowns and because they can't keep up with the newest fashions in the cities. This was also true in Jesus' day. Indeed, some people dismissed Jesus as a candidate for messiah because he came from a small town (John 1:46).

Given this context, by calling his first disciples on the banks of Galilee, Jesus was starting a movement whose boldness clearly didn't come from money, power, or fame. Instead, his followers were "nobodies" from the boondocks of the region. Too often, religious communities, like every other segment of society, give too much authority to individuals because they have wealth. There's even such a thing as a "Christian celebrity" in American culture. Some assume that wealth and earthly success are indications that they have God's stamp of approval. Jesus doesn't teach that at all. Instead, as we'll see in chapter 7, "Sell Everything," Jesus suggests that

people who care too much about money have a hard time understanding the sort of kingdom he was establishing.

There's an important application here for everyday folks. Even if someone has earthly power, they ought not be given higher status in the community of faith. If they do something harmful, moreover, they can't get a special pass because of their worldly position and financial assets. Everyone is equal in Jesus' kingdom.

Not only did Jesus call people who don't have a lot of money or status, his message caused the first disciples to realize instantly how unimportant such things are in the grand scheme of everything. Peter and his pals probably woke up every morning worried about catching fish to feed their family and have enough extra to get other life necessities. They probably prayed to God each morning for one particular blessing: *a lot of fish*.

The anxiety many people feel in our world to make ends meet through their work can be overwhelming. It occupies people's minds and causes their bodies to absorb the negative effects of the stress trying to earn a living can generate. It's not just that they want to eat and have a place to sleep. They don't want to be bums, losers, unworthy. Unfortunately, anyone who grew up poor knows that, in addition to the deprivations associated with poverty, sometimes the worst part is the cultural shame we feel if we are the poor kids in town. Thus, for the first disciples, when Jesus miraculously helped them catch so many fish that their nets were breaking, he was in essence answering their most earnest prayer and elevating their status.

But don't forget what the disciples did next. As soon as Jesus fulfilled every morning's longing for a big bounty, the minute he tossed them their wildest dreams as if they were a few coins into a beggar's cup, what did they do? They dropped it all as if it were nothing. After catching all the fish they could want, they realized *they didn't need no stinkin' fish*.

Their newfound wealth seemed irrelevant in light of something more amazing that they had just encountered. This is the kind of boldness spiritual realization generates. They didn't leave their wealth behind because they were forced to or were guilted into it. It wasn't about willpower. They freely let everything go because they had grasped a treasure beyond all treasures. Later in life, this even helped them to become bold enough to be sassy before political and religious leaders—bold even to the point of speaking the truth in the face of death. Sometimes it's hard to imagine how early Christian martyrs like Perpetua and Felicity were able to courageously stare down the threat of being thrown to wild animals for their beliefs. The only way we can start to understand this fearlessness is to realize that these two young women—one a noblewoman and the other a slave imprisoned with her—realized they were both princesses of heaven. Compared with the rulers of their age, they were as goddesses before confused mortals (John 10:34).

Far from The Temple

During the time of Jesus, the center of religious life was Jerusalem and the great temple it had within its borders. What is historically interesting about this scene with Jesus is that it took place far, far from the Temple. At the time, the official religious leaders believed that what *really* mattered took place in Jerusalem, at the temple. When at least nine Jewish men were too far from the temple to make regular visits, they could rely on a Synagogue, where the Torah was read on scrolls and a male teacher might comment on it. But here we see Jesus delivering serious teachings in an unauthorized, unaccredited context. This point cannot be overestimated. Structural or organizational authority was not as important for Jesus as the authority of truth itself. The social status of neither the teacher nor the student mattered. What mattered was whether someone had an ear to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.



0-2 Jerusalem has seen a lot of violence over the ages. As the over-promised-land, it has been a point of contention for people who focus on the buildings rather than the people and message within the buildings. Jesus' followers are the Holy Land.

Regardless of one's understanding of who Jesus was—God in the flesh, a great moral teacher, or a misguided apocalyptic prophet—one thing should be clear to everyone paying attention: Jesus' revolutionary significance to history rests in his rejection of the importance of power and authority as it had traditionally been conceived. He didn't care about Roman power, and he resisted attempts to turn his spiritual revolution into a violently political one. Consider, for instance, John 18:36, wherein Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to

prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." It's not that his ideas didn't have political implications—of course they did—but just as his spiritual teachings offended the religious hierarchy, they challenged the ultimate importance of political power and the violence that that political power thought it had the right to use against oppressed people.

Thus, for Jesus, the kingdom is the community of *people* who are part of it, not the despots over them who falsely claimed to be gods. Likewise, the temple wasn't a building, it was the people in the building. First, the temple presence was located in his own body (John 2:19), and ultimately his followers would be called the "Body of Christ" and would themselves become the *Temple of the Holy Spirit* (1 Corinthians 6:19). Thus you, the person reading this right now, are invited by Jesus to think of yourself in the same way the ancient Israelites thought of the Temple. In other words, the presence of God is right with you here now. Moreover, you are the Presence for others. You are what Martin Luther called the *larvae Dei* or "masks of God." You don't *have* to go to a building to receive God's message, and you don't *have* to find a human to mediate between you and God. That is, Jesus teaches that if you follow his way, you are an heir

to all the promises of heaven. He never says you have to sit in a pew weekly or attend midweek Bible studies or even sign up for an official membership in a particular denomination to be a child of God.

This surely will sound dangerous to some, as if we're suggesting that meeting together in a community to carry forward the mission of God, learn about the way of Jesus, and commune with others in a sacred feast is a waste of time. That isn't so; yet it's important to pause for a moment here. Has your religious community given you the impression that they own the copyright to the Bible, or have trademarked the cross of Jesus, or have an exclusive contract to dispense the Holy Spirit?

Do they give you a sense that if you don't participate in all their programs you might not be in good with the old guy in the sky?

Perhaps a more pointed question will help here. Even if no one has said it explicitly, do you get the sense that if you don't go to church you might be in trouble with heaven? If so, has anyone explained how many times they think you can miss religious services before you are *out* of the kingdom? Do you get the impression that if you stopped going to church altogether you might even be sent to hell in the end?

Most of the time, no one says that we better go to church to earn God's love. But it's often implied, and frequently feared. Why then don't religious teachers like to let folks relax a bit and know that they don't need to go to church to stay in God's good graces? There are two main reasons for this.

The first reason churchgoers rarely hear that church doesn't score a person points with God is that it isn't in any church worker's best interest to remind people of this fact. To the extent that church is, especially in places like the United States, an entrepreneurial endeavor. By "entrepreneurial" we mean that, unlike old European churches, where people tended to attend the parish church closest to home, Americans learned early on that there were several "brands" of Christianity competing in each town. Thus, church growth was often as much about keeping the mortgage paid as it was about saving souls. In such a context, telling people they don't have to come to the "business" is *bad for business*. In other words, most church workers have no incentive to tell you that what they provide is not *absolutely* essential to the wellbeing of your eternal soul.

The second reason people don't hear that they can skip church to go to the beach with family is more poignant. People who teach in church themselves worry that if they let the people think they won't go to hell for missing church, they *might actually end up in hell*, and this will bring judgment upon them as teachers of falsehood. Secretly, we think most clergy and youth workers know that what we're saying here is probably true; nonetheless the fear of judgment in the unlikely case we're wrong is too risky a wager.

All of this is common but surprising for conservative evangelicals. They regularly teach that God is able to forgive our sins, even serious ones, and that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. Meanwhile, there's a nagging sense among many lay people in evangelicalism that the only sin they can't get away with (besides the Unforgivable Sin, discussed in chapter 12, and perhaps homosexuality) is a lack of church attendance. It's as if one is not saved or condemned works in general, but instead by the austerity of sitting on hard pews to hear boring sermons for at least 50 weeks a year.

If this chapter has already got your hackles up, remember that one of the most offensive things Jesus said when he visited Jerusalem was that the temple would be destroyed but that he would rebuild it in three days (John 2:19). By this, he meant that God was no longer going to be confined to a building made by human hands (Acts 7:48), but rather was going to re-emerge in his own body, and subsequently in the bodies of his followers till the end of time.

Do I Need a Pastor, Priest, Master, or Guru?

Gathering with others to celebrate the gift of existence and remind each other of the way of Jesus is indeed central to what followers have long identified as an essential component of discipleship. It has allowed the faithful to gather and find sanctuary from an often heartless world that finds Jesus' teachings foolish and impossible to follow. Likewise, people should generally get advanced training in theology and practical skills for ministry, including training in how to maintain a safe community for vulnerable people. This means that some of the structures of oversight, reporting, and spiritual accountability can be helpful when healthy.

That said, just because someone has a quality degree or grand title doesn't mean that they are the only way to access God. Pastors, priests, and other church workers can be extremely helpful in a person's healing and growth. But they are not *absolutely* needed in the sense that they have exclusive access to God.

Several years ago, one of Jeff's theology students converted to Christianity. She was an international student from a country where converting to Christianity was a crime that could involve harsh punishments. Our family took her under our wing as an honorary member of the family. We took her to several churches so she could get a sense of the diversity of styles and congregational cultures. One Sunday, we went out to lunch as a family to discuss what she'd learned from the various church visits. It was great to have this young woman give us her reflections on her visits. This was all new to her, so she was able to observe things with fresh eyes. Moreover, she had the ability to be bold and sassy because she was no longer afraid of false authorities. After all, she wasn't worried about annoying authorities in her life when she had already decided to risk her ability to return home and her very life for her beliefs. One thing she said stood out to us above all else:

There seem to be two sorts of pastors. There are some who I *really need* when I'm hurting and want to pray with someone. Then, there are others who always are talking about how much I *need them* if I want to get close to God.

This was startling but, after reflection, exactly what was going on. Too often, religious leaders emphasize the importance of their own authority or role in connecting people to God at the expense of recognizing that all people can relate to God directly. Part of all this has to do with the way we use the word “need.” If someone says, “You need a vacation,” they are probably noticing that you are overly stressed and could use some time to rest and recover. This is entirely different from saying something like, “You need to go to the court and pay this ticket.” In this second case, it is a command and comes with a threat: *Go to court or else*. In this sense, it is probably the case that *you need to find a good mentor or spiritual counselor*. If you are hurting, experiencing grief, need to get something off your chest, or are simply wondering how to mature spiritually, a clergy person might be just what the doctor ordered! But to think of such a valuable resource as if it were a requirement along the lines of a court appearance to handle a traffic ticket is a terrible misunderstanding of the role of religious guides in our lives.

Just as there is a sense in which you might need a pastor, if you want to be thriving and happy, you need a healthy, uplifting, and welcoming community. Loneliness can be bad for your health. What’s more, if you want to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, it’s important to find support from others who believe in his radical message, a message that generally goes against the assumptions of the world at large. Common sense in our day says you should get the upper hand on your enemies and take what you can from them. Jesus says to love our enemies. Common sense says we should try and gain power. Jesus says the last shall be first and the first shall be last. In a world of transaction, gathering with other followers of Jesus helps us remind each other and in fact embody a different kingdom: one of unconditional love. For this reason, finding a good community is vital for healthy spiritual life.

If wicked people steal your religious logo, feel free to burn it and get a new logo.

But this doesn’t mean you can’t consider leaving a *particular* community. Cults tend to give their followers the impression that if they leave their little version of religion, they might have horrific spiritual consequences, perhaps even damnation. If someone teaches that, it’s a good indication that you are in an unhealthy community. Of course, there are some groups that are on the right track and some on the wrong track. Some groups are positively goofy and have no real grasp of the truth. But no religious organization can slap an exclusive logo on Truth or the Holy Spirit. Over the centuries, many churches have claimed to own the copyright on God’s true teaching but actually seemed to have been working against the teachings of Jesus. In such cases, wise followers of Jesus were bold enough to simply disregard false claims to authority. In other words, if wicked people steal your religious logo, feel free to burn it and get a new logo. Maybe the idea of logos is too corporate in the first place. But the point remains: true followers of Jesus are not interested in having the right label but rather in following the true way.

Holiness

Notice what happened immediately after Peter realized that Jesus had unique authority. He got scared. He said to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8) This is an

important element of the story. Sometimes, religious authorities try and use various social or eternal threats to get us to stay in line, morally (at least according to their understanding of morality). But here, Jesus doesn't bring any words of condemnation. He only brings a gift. What's important about this is that *true holiness* isn't something that involves force or threats of punishment. True holiness makes us realize the ways in which we have not been living rightly in an instant. Perhaps you've met someone of extraordinary character, saintly even. As much as you might admire them, it might cause you to feel embarrassed that you've been too caught up in things that don't matter, or maybe you've been acting like a jerk to people around you. This then leads to a natural response: a sense of fear that we aren't good enough for the way that Jesus describes.

True authority doesn't rest on official titles, or threats, or worldly status. True authority rests on its own connection to the truth. This is important for all of us. If we find ourselves beneath domineering religious leaders who always have to remind us of their authority and our unworthiness, we're probably in an unhealthy place. Jesus didn't threaten Peter with a butt kicking for his sins, he intuitively realized his lack of holiness. Intuition isn't infallible. But too often people are taught to ignore their intuitions in religious circles. Yet here, the apostle Peter decided to follow Jesus not because of clever philosophical arguments or threats of hell. He followed because he intuitively realized that he was in the presence of something and someone magnificent and life changing.



0-3 How many people over the ages have awoke to a life of fishing, hoping for sustenance but also afraid they might get skunked. Jesus taught about a treasure even more important than making a living. He taught we were free to boldly live.

Note how Jesus reacts. Instead of piling on Peter with words of condemnation, he brings a word of comfort: "Don't be afraid." (v. 10). Jesus can say this because he knows that unconditional love creates a new sort of character in the people it embraces. Jesus invited people into his kingdom who didn't yet have the characteristics of the community because, by being brought into a gracious community of unconditional love, they would find themselves transformed, however incrementally, into a new sort of person within a new sort of community. After all, fear is what keeps people in cults, love is what draws people to the true kingdom.

Evangelism and Fishing for Humans

Some readers might be uncomfortable about one aspect of this passage: the part about Jesus saying that the disciples will be fishing for people. This sounds to many like the age-old move of cults to brainwash people into the group. Most of us are familiar with that uncomfortable

moment when we realize some religious sect has a couple of religious sales reps at the door. Sometimes, families even turn off the lights and television to make it seem like they're out of town when missionaries come knocking on the door. In such cases it seems like the whole thing is just a scam to dupe people into handing their minds—and pocketbooks—over to some superstitious scam artists.

But what Jesus means in this passage is different from this sort of thing. His point was that instead of a life focused on making ends meet, or the accumulation of stuff, instead of worrying about keeping the rituals and décor of religious building in order, his movement was about the wellbeing and healing of *people*.

When we were growing up in church, missionaries would occasionally come and share messages that often made us feel guilty about not deciding to give up everything and try to convert “heathens” to Christianity in some foreign developing nation or to go around the neighborhood saving souls with little pamphlets. Stacie even remembered being terrified that God might “call” her to do such things despite her utter lack of desire to do so. What surprised us, however, was that at some point in our lives, a point when we were blown away by a clear understanding of Jesus’ message, we realized that the only thing we *wanted* to do was to share the liberating and powerful teachings of Jesus with others. This time, our goal wasn’t to trick folks into joining our little club, but to invite them to consider the boat-rocking and joyful message of Jesus, the good news.

So the only authority we bring as we share these thoughts with you is the authority based on a truth that doesn’t depend on our status or degrees: we are confident that you are unconditionally loved by the infinite. Should you choose to truly believe this, you can find peace and salvation from the self-imposed hell you might be feeling right now. Now, when you truly taste and see that God is good in this way, it will be hard for you to shut up about it. And when it seems appropriate, you will be able to share the message with even the most intimidating people and groups. You will be able to do this not because you have an extra measure of courage. You’ll be able to do it because of the boldness you have knowing that you are a son or daughter of heaven, and that there is nothing your enemies can take from you since the whole of the universe is your inheritance.

Optional Exercises

1. Track down and watch the documentary film *Marjoe* and discuss or contemplate what it says about religious celebrity, authority, and funding.
2. If you belong to a religious community, listen and take note on how your community treats newcomers, how do they treat those of less status or the poor, how do they care for or treat the people both inside and outside of the religious community? Further, how much discussion is there over church attendance, finances or building projects? Do you notice an imbalance over caring for the people vs. the institution? If so, are there any constructive ways that you can help encourage your community to start prioritizing care for people over the institution?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- 1. Do you expect your religious leaders to be responsible for your faith?** Who, if anyone, do you trust most as an authority in your life? What characteristics make them trustworthy? *Should* you trust this authority, given our reading?
- 2. In your religious community, have you yet heard a message so powerful that you'd stop caring about what you used to think was most important?** If not, what keeps you in your community? If it is fear, what would help you make a healthy spiritual move in your life?
3. If you are a religious believer, what authority (if any) caused you to believe in the first place? Was it a legitimate authority?
4. How has community been helpful in your life? Even if you've not had positive community experiences thus far, what sorts of characteristics of a community would you find helpful?
5. Without trying to give the "right religious answer," what do you feel confident you'd give your life for, if anything?
6. If you are part of a religious community that claims to celebrate the good news taught by Jesus? Does the message of this community sound like good news to you?
7. Are there areas in your life where you might embrace boldness? If so where and how?
8. Where can you take responsibility for your own faith and offer help in this area within your community or for yourself?
9. What is evangelism? If this is something your community does, how do they approach evangelism? Are you comfortable with this approach? Can you think of a better way to share what you believe to be good news to others in your world?