

## ***Following Jesus***

Our second reading is Luke 9:57-62. Here in our text we observe three individuals who are would-be disciples and who are challenged by Jesus in their faulty understanding of discipleship. Follow as I read **Luke 9:57-62**.

*<sup>57</sup> As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."<sup>58</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."<sup>59</sup> To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."<sup>60</sup> But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."<sup>61</sup> Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home."<sup>62</sup> Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

The key word in our text is, "follow" (vv. 57, 59, 61). Two of the three would-be disciples declare their intentions of following Jesus and the other is directly challenged by Jesus to follow him. A disciple is one who learns by following the master-teacher and those of us who claim the name "Christian" are necessarily followers of Christ. This passage of Scripture for today has been called a travel narrative, which begins with the phrase, "As they were walking along...." Jesus was on the move and we might say that the crucified, risen Lord Jesus is still on the move and we must learn what it means to travel with him, i.e., to follow him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a brilliant theologian and pastor whose preaching, leadership and writings challenged the complacency of Christians who treated saving grace as something cheap and undemanding. Young Bonhoeffer himself declined the way of safety and because of his opposition to the Nazi regime was executed in Flossenbergr at the age of 39. When Bonhoeffer was only 30, his most influential book, [\*The Cost of Discipleship\*](#), was published. In this exposition of the teachings of Jesus that speak about discipleship, Bonhoeffer makes a clear and convincing case that discipleship is not optional if one makes a claim to have received saving grace and the gift of eternal life. Bonhoeffer lived up to his own definition of the Christian life as one of discipleship, himself following Jesus to a martyr's death.

In my tradition, the concept of salvation is almost exclusively bound up with simply accepting what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Everlasting heaven or hell are presented as the options facing the sinner, who then is asked to decide between these two alternatives—a real "no-brainer." In presenting the offer of salvation, the evangelist simply tells what Jesus has done and asks only that the would-be convert believe the fact of the gospel and ask Jesus to forgive one's sins (if the subject of sin is broached at all) and come into the forgiven sinner's heart. Then the new "convert" is assured of the free gift of eternal life, and is told to never doubt this guaranteed salvation. This so-called free grace, however is, in

the words of Bonhoeffer, “cheap grace,” and is not the kind of grace that works through faith as a commitment to Jesus as Lord.

As Jesus and his disciples were traveling on the road, someone came up to Jesus and volunteered. *The Message* paraphrases verse 57 as saying, “On the road someone asked if he could go along. ‘I’ll go with you, wherever,’ he said.” Reading this, one can almost sense the flippancy of this statement. Certainly Jesus knew the superficiality of this volunteer. Here was a would-be disciple who obviously was unwilling to pay the price of following Jesus. His “volunteerism” seemed based solely upon the attraction of Jesus.

The Gospels are filled with pictures of how individuals and even multitudes were attracted to Jesus. He was, after all, a great miracle worker and teacher. His teachings revealed great insight into the word of God and human nature. Jesus’ miracles provided healing for the sick, sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf and wholeness for the lame. The Lord Jesus did exorcisms of demons, feeding the hungry multitudes and even resurrection from death. And there was something attractive about the very character and persona of Jesus. The worst of sinners, those who were regarded as outcasts by the religious insiders, were drawn to Jesus because of his unconditional love and acceptance. So, this volunteer came as did many others, seeking to join up with Jesus for what Jesus could do for him.

Cheap grace is being offered wholesale these days. In this age and culture of the voracious consumer, the North American church is offering a gospel of accommodation to the needs and tastes of the consumer, the would-be disciple. Consumers are being drawn to the Jesus who meets every felt need and enables us to reach our preferred goals. Thousands, perhaps millions of people are drawn into the church each year and even profess faith in the Jesus who “will do for them,” making their lives bearable or even more successful and prosperous. Sadly, many of these people will never be confronted with the superficiality of this ersatz version of “faith,” and will never know the joy or the converting power of the true gospel of the kingdom, the life of discipleship. Tragically they will be deceived into thinking that the version of “grace” offered them is the real thing.

(Sadly, I reflect on the large number of those under the influence of my pastoral ministry who were baptized and added to the church roles whose experience fell short of a true conversion. History, and possibly the final judgment will show they never became followers of Jesus. Tragically I helped induce in them a false sense of security).

Jesus spoke about and faced increasing rejection, opposition and hostility, which would eventually be consummated in his arrest, trial and crucifixion (9:22, 44; 17:25; 20:17). Jesus warns one would-be follower about his dependence on the hospitality of others to give him shelter. *The Message* again brings our text to life

in a present-day setting: “Jesus was curt: ‘Are you ready to rough it? We’re not staying in the best inns, you know’” (58).

As we decide about answering the call to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship we have to answer for ourselves whether or not it’s worth it. [G Campbell Morgan](#) (1863-1945) said that when Jesus spoke of not having his own home he did so, not remorsefully with self-pity, but with joy and jubilation. “When next you quote these words of Jesus,” said the great English preacher, “don’t pity him. He does not need your pity. Pity yourself rather if you have a home that holds you back, when Christ wants you out upon the high places of the world....Pity yourself if you are rooted anywhere, when he would have you move to some other place in your pilgrimage with him towards the cross and for human redemption.” Our greatest compensation in discipleship is to know and enjoy Jesus himself, his fellowship and purpose for our lives, as we join him on pilgrimage.

As Jesus continued on his way, he saw another would-be disciple and said to him, “Follow me “(v. 59). In this case, it appears that this man has a problem with priorities in his life. Like the first man, he seems to have an interest in following Jesus, but something stands in his way. This second would-be follower seemed to have a legitimate and even a biblical right to hesitate in following Jesus. He asks permission to first go and bury his father. Every conscientious Jewish son recognized his responsibility to take care of his father’s burial. This was “a religious duty having precedence over all else.” In fact, this was a common fear among Jews who had no male son, that there would be no one to see to his proper funeral and burial. This would-be disciple must have thought that Jesus would honor his rationale for postponing obedience. One can even use verses from the Bible to rationalize disobedience to Christ. Surely Jesus would not argue with Scripture! But Jesus knows when we’re seeking to justify disobedience even on the basis of our use of Scripture when it suits our purpose. I’ve known of parents who discouraged their young adult children from following Jesus to the mission field by quoting to them verses like the ones that speak about honoring father and mother.

It would be unlikely that Jesus would hinder the fulfillment of genuine family responsibilities. He seemed to perceive an unwillingness to give priority to following him. For one who has not given Jesus absolute priority, there will always be a series of things and events and excuses that will keep one from following him. Whatever the case, Jesus told him to let the dead bury their own dead. What he referred to was the fact that there were plenty of spiritually dead people who were available to take care of these duties, which would be overseen by responsible family members. Jesus was not opposed to carrying out family responsibilities but rather was upholding the priority that must be given to him above all other relationships and commitments. The choice we face is in making Jesus the Lord of our lives. When he is Lord, then all other relationships become secondary to us (e.g. Lk. 14:25-27).

Genuine faith that responds to the grace of God in Christ is life-changing and priority rearranging. If one still has the same loyalties and basically the same lifestyle after that “profession of faith” then there is no evidence of a possession of faith. If worship is no different and has no priority for you, then you haven’t made the discipleship choice. If your spending habits are the same and there is no priority in your giving to the kingdom of God and no change in the priority of your time investments, then you haven’t made the discipleship choice of following Jesus. Faith that saves is faith that works in obedience.

The choices that we make are not always between the overtly good and bad things of life. To follow Jesus means that he must take precedence over even the good things he has given to us, including even our families. It’s not unusual to make an idol of one’s family, and in the name of being godly, Christian parents we can place our children above the place that God should have in our homes. And, because Jesus promises the blessing of “these other things” being added to us (Matt. 6:33), he’ll see to it that our children’s needs are met. I’ve seen children’s lives wrecked by well-intentioned and overly strict or overly indulgent parents who placed on their children the priority that God alone deserves. And children whose parents give priority to God and whose lives are centered in Christ are privileged to receive the blessings of God.

Jesus knew the hearts of these would-be disciples and one element missing in all three was a passion for Jesus and his kingdom, a passion that would be necessary to sustain their perseverance in following him. Like the others, this man was sincerely drawn to Jesus and something in him wanted to follow, to give his life to Jesus. But also there was a reluctance to give all to him. Bonhoeffer says that this man, when he came to Jesus, already had his career mapped out. He simply wanted Jesus to bless his plans. For this man, there was not a heart to fully obey. For him and for us, to delay is to disobey. He wanted to follow Jesus as a matter of convenience, and expected Jesus to wait on his agenda and allow him to first fulfill his personal plans. But Jesus, remember, is traveling, on the move. And if we delay, he moves on without us.

No one can follow Jesus while looking back, says Jesus. He will be as useless as a farmer trying to plow while looking backwards. He can make a mess of things (v. 62). Looking back takes us off course, just as a farmer begins to plow crooked furrows. Such backward looking and being distracted makes us useless in kingdom of God service. And we can make a mess of our lives.

A focused will and passionate heart for Jesus is what Paul expressed when he wrote,

*“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal*

*to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus”*  
(Phil.1:21; 3:10-14).

Paul knew there's no substitute for union with Christ, who invites us to join him, not in a life of drudgery, but one of joy and the enjoyment of being with Christ.

My father, who was my childhood hero, liked to tell about the time he let me help him paint the back porch of our home. My contribution was minimal, and maybe even detrimental to the project, but he let me swipe away, and he would touch up my misapplied strokes. Several times during the project, I would break the silence to ask him, “Daddy, are we painting?” He would assure me several times with words I loved to hear, when I would ask again, emphasizing the word, “we:” “Daddy, are *we* painting?” “Yes, son, we are painting.” Following Jesus brings the joy of assurance that we are walking and serving with him.

Only when we have this kind of passion for Jesus do we know we'll follow him with faithfulness, undivided loyalty and perseverance. Only with this passion would we remain faithful through life's trials and disappointments and during the “dry” periods when prayers seem unanswered and our emotions are largely negative. This passion for Jesus is what enables those who're being persecuted and are even facing martyrdom to remain faithful in their witness and stand for Jesus. In my latter years, I continue to face the possibility of paying a price to follow Jesus, one that will test my faith, obedience and willingness to sacrifice things held dear. It may mean the testing of our moral convictions.

To follow Jesus is to join him in his work of loving our neighbor, caring for the needy and oppressed, standing for the cause of justice and mercy, expressing concern and practicing forgiveness, joining Jesus wherever he goes. He calls us to himself. And if we would be his disciples we'll come after him, abide in him and follow him wherever he may lead us. He's always on the move. We must follow him.