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## THE ONLY WAY TO FOLLOW JESUS

Luke 9:57-62

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Luke Lesson 48

## The Only Way to Follow Jesus Luke 9:57-62

A cartoon showed a church building with a large billboard in front that proclaimed: “The LITE CHURCH: 24% fewer commitments, home of the 7.5% tithe, 15 minute sermons, 45 minute worship service; we have only 8 commandments—your choice. We use just 3 spiritual laws and have an 800 year millennium. Everything you’ve wanted in a church ... and less!” (*Leadership* [Summer, 1983, p. 81]).

Sadly, there is more truth than fiction in that cartoon! Many churches are lowering the commitment level to attract attenders. They’re afraid that if they preach against sin, they might offend some folks, so they focus on the positive and speak about sin only in the most general terms. They don’t want to deal with touchy doctrinal issues, because people in our culture want to be tolerant and non-judgmental. They wouldn’t dream of practicing church discipline! Their focus is on being upbeat so that everyone feels loved and accepted unconditionally. As a result, we have millions of churchgoers who call themselves Christians, but who are not fully committed to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

George Gallup contends that fewer than ten percent of evangelical Christians could be called deeply committed. The majority who profess Christianity do not know basic Christian teachings and do not act differently because of their Christian experience. As a Lutheran pastor put it, “Ninety percent of our parishes across the country require less commitment than the local Kiwanis club” (Wayne Pohl, *Leadership* [Winter, 1982], p. 95).

In our text, Jesus makes some radical demands on His followers. Interestingly, just two verses later He laments that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few (10:2). If Jesus had hired a marketing consultant, he would have said, “Lord, if you want more workers, you’re going to have to be a bit more realistic. You just lost down three good volunteers because you demanded all or nothing!”

But Jesus didn't lower the standard. Following Christ is like taking a class on the pass/fail system. There is no curve. You either make it or you don't. He requires that you devote everything that you are and have to Him or nothing at all. It is important to realize that these verses are not just directed to those who are considering "full-time" Christian service. They are addressed to everyone who would consider being a follower of Christ or disciple (the terms are synonymous). The Lord draws a line in the sand:

The only way to follow Jesus is totally.

In the context, Jesus has twice announced to the disciples His impending rejection and death (9:22, 44). He has resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem and the cross (9:51). He has also taught His followers that the first requirement of following Him is to embrace self-denial and the cross (9:23). Here we encounter two men who volunteer to be Jesus' followers and one whom Jesus calls to follow Him. We don't know whether these men responded or not, although the sense I get is that they did not. But Luke doesn't focus on their response because he wants us to apply Jesus' words to our own hearts: Am I following Jesus totally or just casually? As someone has observed, "There's a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in doing something, you do it only when circumstances permit. When you're committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results" (Art Turock, *Reader's Digest* [11/94], p. 212). These verses show us that,

1. There are many who think that following Jesus is important, but not the most important thing in life.

These three men all thought that following Jesus was a good thing to do. Two of them expressed their own desire to follow Him, which is more than could be said of many in the crowds who heard Jesus preach. But while they wanted to follow Jesus and viewed that as important, it wasn't the most important thing. There were other factors that needed to be considered. In the words of the third man, "I will follow You, Lord; but ..." (9:61).

That word "but" has kept many well-meaning people out of the kingdom of God! In the case of the first man, Jesus must have sensed that his offer to follow Jesus was a bit impulsive and idealistic. The man had not thought through carefully what following

Jesus would entail. So Jesus spelled out for him up front the fact that following Him would mean giving up many of the personal comforts that he enjoyed and perhaps took for granted: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (9:58).

I pondered this verse as I was sitting in front of my fireplace in my comfortable home, sipping some hot coffee! Does Jesus mean that to follow Him, we must sell our homes, deny ourselves all comforts in life, and become itinerant jungle missionaries? If so, very few would qualify. Even many missionaries have comfortable homes to live in. I think that Jesus was pointing out what He had already said in 9:23, that to follow Him requires a life of self-denial, not of self-indulgence. As J. C. Ryle explains,

He would have no man enlisted on false pretences. He would have it distinctly understood that there is a battle to be fought, and a race to be run,—a work to be done, and many hard things to be endured,—if we propose to follow Him. Salvation He is ready to bestow, without money and without price. Grace by the way, and glory in the end, shall be given to every sinner who comes to Him. But He would not have us ignorant that we shall have deadly enemies,—the world, the flesh, and the devil, and that many will hate us, slander us, and persecute us, if we become His disciples. He does not wish to discourage us, but He does wish us to know the truth (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:339).

When I joined the Coast Guard Reserves the recruiter was not exactly honest. Honesty got in the way of their recruitment quotas, so it wasn't high on their priorities! The recruiter learned that I liked to read, so he told me that there was a library on the base. What he didn't tell me is that no recruit could go there until he earned the privilege, and that no one could possibly earn the privilege before the sixth week in boot camp, and then it would only be for an hour a week! One guy became the laughingstock of the base when he showed up for boot camp with his fishing pole and water skis, because the recruiter had told him that the base was on an island (true) and that you could fish and water ski there (true, a person might do that, but false if that person was a recruit!).

Jesus wasn't a dishonest recruiter. He wants us to know up front that He is enlisting us in warfare against the powers of darkness, and that warfare is often difficult. If we're looking for a program where our personal comfort is paramount, we should look elsewhere. Following Jesus must be more important than *our personal comfort*.

The second man thought that following Jesus was important, but not more important than *family obligations*. When Jesus said, "Follow Me," he replied, "Permit me first to go and bury my father" (9:59). Commentators differ over whether the man's father had just died, whether he was near death, or whether he had a few years to go. I am inclined toward either of the last two views, since if his father had just died, he probably wouldn't be tagging along after Jesus at that moment. G. Campbell Morgan refers to a traveler in the Middle East who was trying to enlist a young Arab man as his guide. The man replied that he could not go because he had to bury his father. When the traveler expressed his sympathy, he learned that the young man's father had not died, but that this was an expression meaning that he had to stay with his father as long as he was alive (*The Gospel According to Luke* [Revell], p. 133). So probably the man Jesus was calling was saying, "After my father is gone, I will follow You."

The Bible teaches that we should care for our elderly parents. The fifth commandment enjoins us to honor our father and mother. Paul states that if we do not take care of our own families, we are worse than unbelievers and have denied the faith (1 Tim. 5:8). Certainly, Jesus was not negating the Ten Commandments. He came to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it (Matt. 5:17). But, if our commitment to family is greater than our commitment to Jesus Christ and His kingdom, we've got it wrong. Jesus' reply, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead," means, "Let those who are spiritually dead tend to such matters." Then He adds, "But as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."

In our day there has been a resurgence of emphasis on the family in evangelical circles. Much of this emphasis is a needed corrective to the neglect of family relationships that often characterized Christian homes in the past. For example, missionaries in the past often would ship their young children off to missionary

schools, where they were away from their parents during their formative years. Even Hudson Taylor sent his children back to England for their education, rather than keeping them with him and his wife in China. They viewed it as the cost of discipleship. I think that this practice is a gross misapplication of Christ's words. If God calls me to the mission field and also gives me children, I believe He is calling me to have them with me on the field. If that is not possible, my first responsibility is to care for my children until they are old enough to be separated from me without causing them serious problems.

But, having said that, it is possible to be sinfully selfish about the family, where we wrongfully exalt the family over God's kingdom purposes. I have heard of Christian families who do not get involved in serving the Lord because it would interfere with their family time. Some even stay away from church because they need a family day together. This teaches the children that family is more important than God and His work in this world. Some parents prohibit their children from involvement with missions because they fear that they could get killed in another country. If I may get personal, as many of you know, we almost lost our daughter Joy last summer in an accident in Mexico. I easily could have said, "You're not going down there again." I don't want to lose her, and it is risky to drive on those roads. But to prohibit her from going would be a selfish command that puts family above the kingdom of God. If His kingdom is the priority, I must let her go, entrusting her to God's protection.

The third man volunteers to follow Jesus, but with the stipulation that he first be allowed to go home and say good-bye to everyone. He thought that following Jesus was important, but not important enough to let go of the *old relationships and ways*. The Lord could tell that the man's heart was divided. Like Lot's wife, he just couldn't quite cut the ties with the old life. He wanted to keep the door open so that if things didn't work out, he could always go back. He wasn't willing to make a clean break with the old contacts and way of life.

Jesus replies, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (9:62). In other words, His followers must be totally focused on His purpose.

They can't keep one foot in the world just in case things don't work out in the Kingdom. Their hearts cannot be divided between living for the old way of life and living for Jesus Christ. In a picture of total dedication to a task, the ancient writer, Hesiod, speaks of "one who will attend his work and drive a straight furrow and is past the age of gaping after his fellows, but will keep his mind on his work" (cited by Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:983). Another writer explains, "Following him is not a task which is added to others like working a second job.... It is everything. It is a solemn commitment which forces the disciples-to-be to reorder all their other duties" (Karris, cited by Bock, p. 984).

When Jesus talks of putting one's hand to the plow and turning back, He is not referring to someone who starts out in so-called "full time Christian service" but then leaves the ministry for "secular" work. He isn't referring to how a person earns a living, but rather to a basic focus in life. The disciple must fix his eyes on Jesus Christ and His cause. He must seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). Whether he earns his living digging ditches or preaching the gospel, his consuming purpose in life is to know Jesus Christ and to make Him known. Thus,

2. Following Jesus is not just an important thing—it's the most important thing in life.

It's not just a slice of life, something that rounds out your life and makes it a bit nicer. It's the center, the hub of your life. Everything else revolves around Jesus and His kingdom purpose. My career must be subservient to the will of God and His kingdom purpose. My family life must be centered on following Jesus Christ and serving Him. My spare time is not my own, to do with as I please. It must be yielded to Jesus Christ and His purpose. This is not to say that every spare minute must be spent in serving the Lord. He made us so that we require rest and recreation. We need not feel guilty about taking appropriate time off for leisure activities. But the reason for the time off is so that we will be refreshed to serve the Lord better.

I think that Christians need to do some careful thinking about the subject of retirement. While there's nothing wrong with the concept of retirement, per se, Christians should view it much differently than the world does. We should view it as an opportunity

to be freed up from our jobs so that we can be devoted to the Lord's work. To dream of getting your Winnebago and parking it in Yellowstone every summer and Yuma every winter is not a godly focus, unless your purpose is to reach out to those in Yellowstone and Yuma! For the life of me, I can't figure out why many pastors and missionaries retire from the Lord's service at 65! I realize that we may need to slow down a bit as our bodies get older. But why should we ever retire from the Lord's service? I'll preach as long as some church will tolerate the old geezer!

Making our commitment to Jesus Christ the most important thing in life means several things:

- Commitment to Christ cannot be based on an emotional, idealistic decision.

The first man was probably caught up with the euphoria of the moment. Crowds were following Jesus. Hundreds were being healed. Jesus' disciples were a part of this exciting movement. The man wanted in on the action. So he gushes, "I will follow You wherever You go."

But Jesus realized that the man had not thought it through carefully. He had not considered the cost. He hadn't thought of the hardship, the rejection, and the persecution that would inevitably follow. He had an idealized, glamorous view of what it meant to follow Jesus. But it wouldn't carry him through the tough times.

Profession is easy. Practice over the long haul is the test. You can attend an evangelistic meeting where the music is captivating. There is a wonderful spirit in the air. The preacher tells a moving story and gives an invitation and people start streaming down the aisles. You feel good about what he has said. You realize that you have some needs in your life that Jesus could meet. So you go forward and meet with a counselor. He explains that by believing in Jesus you can have all your sins forgiven and be assured of going to heaven. So you pray to receive Jesus.

But does that make you a follower of Jesus? Did you truly become a child of God at that moment? Maybe, but not necessarily! Do you understand that following Jesus and living for self are mutually exclusive, and that you are committing yourself to follow Jesus? Do you understand that following Jesus and clinging to

your sins are not compatible, and that when you trust in Christ as Savior, you begin a lifelong battle against sin? Do you understand that while salvation is totally God's gracious gift, apart from any merit or works on our part, the one who receives God's gift is no longer his own; he has been bought with a price? He must now live for the One who loved him and gave Himself for him. Commitment to Christ as Savior cannot be based on good vibes.

- Commitment to Christ cannot be a casual, whenever-you-find-the-time matter.

What could be more noble and biblical than burying one's father? But Jesus won't allow this would-be follower to postpone his commitment until it's convenient, even for this noble purpose! If heaven and hell are true (and every follower of Jesus must believe that they are, since He taught both so clearly and forcefully), and if death is a daily potentiality for every person, then the message of the kingdom of God is urgent! The people we encounter each day are heading toward the glory of heaven or toward the agonies of hell, and they are a heartbeat away from their eternal destiny! We can't be casual about our commitment to Christ in light of these solemn truths!

- Commitment to Christ cannot be a phase in life that you put behind you someday.

To leave your options open so that you can go back to the old life if things don't work out as a Christian is to reject following Jesus. Jesus later mentions Lot's wife as a sober example to everyone who would follow Him when He says, "Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall preserve it" (Luke 17:32-33). While the Christian life is a process of daily yielding more and more to the Lord, it can never be approached from the mentality, "I'll try it and see if it works. Otherwise, I'll go back to the old ways or try some other way." If Jesus is the Lord, then the only way is to go forward with Him. Turning back is not even an option.

## Conclusion

Since the only way to follow Jesus is totally, each one of us must soberly ask ourselves the question, "*Am I following Jesus totally?*" Am I holding back something for myself? Am I keeping

one foot in the world just in case? Am I hanging on to some secret sins, just so I won't miss out on what the world has to offer? Am I trying to serve Christ and mammon? Am I saying, "I'll follow You, Lord, but . . .?" Everything after that "but" needs to go!

There's a danger that you will hear a message like this and in a moment of emotion say, "All right, I'm giving everything to Jesus! I'm going all out for Him! I'll be a missionary, even a martyr if necessary." But, if you don't count the cost, you will be like the first man. How do we implement total commitment to Jesus on a daily basis?

Someone observed that we think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table. "Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all." But the reality for most of us is that He sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, "Get lost." Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.

Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of denying self for Jesus' sake, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul (Fred Craddock, in *Leadership* [Fall, 1984], p. 47).

That kind of daily commitment in small increments begins with a total entrusting of your life and eternal destiny to Jesus Christ. He gave Himself on the cross so that you would not have to face God's wrath on account of your sins. Jesus calls you to turn from your selfishness and sin and to follow Him. If you say, "I'll follow Jesus, but . . ." you must erase the "but." The only way to follow Jesus is totally.

## Discussion Questions

1. Is following Jesus totally a once-for-all decision, an ongoing process, or both?
2. Can a person of nominal commitment be assured of his salvation? Support your answer with Scripture.
3. How should total commitment to Christ affect our use of our time, our money, and our abilities?
4. Is there a difference between salvation and discipleship? Is the latter an option for the super-committed?

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