

Sermon: Christ Calls Us to Commitment¹

Text: Luke 9:51-62

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“⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Our commitment to friendships, our commitment to our spouses, as children to parents, and even in our faith in God may sometimes be challenged during problematic times, times of difficulty, and extreme adversity.

But this is not to say that we have failed in our commitments. To be sure, problems, challenges, and changes will *measure* our level of commitment, will allow for the opportunity to *evaluate* and possibly to *re-commit* with greater vigour.

Our text from the Gospel of Luke is that part of the story of salvation when Jesus *sets His face*² to go to Jerusalem, that is, out of commitment and of necessity³ *begins* His travel from Galilee to Jerusalem by way of Samaria with His disciples in order to fulfil the work of redemption and to be exalted. The people and circumstances they encounter along the way provide Jesus with opportunities to begin a more expanded programme of teachings and lessons on discipleship, including the important role of commitment!

1. Our Text Within Luke’s Gospel.

Luke 9:51 begins what has been referred to as the central section of Luke’s Gospel. This section lasts all the way till chapter 19 verse 44 and contains much material (over forty-four percent) that is unique to this Gospel. This material helps to complete facets on what we can consider the jewel of

¹ Preached on Sunday, June 30, 2013.

² αὐτὸς τὸ πρόσωπον ἐστήρισεν τοῦ, “he set fast his face” is a Hebraistic idiom.

³ Necessity is a very important concept in Luke’s writings, occurring 18 times.

the Gospel's presentation of Jesus' ministry. In this section, Jesus, on His travel up to Jerusalem, focuses on *what it means to follow God truly*.

Leading up until chapter 9 in the Gospel, Jesus in chapter 4 announced His ministry mandate “. . . to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (4:18-19). We read on after, that Jesus called His disciples. He healed many sicknesses and exorcised demons. He calmed the sea, fed the five thousand. He established His authority, taught with great wisdom proclaiming the kingdom of God. He raised a widow's son and a girl from the dead. Peter, James, and John were present at His spectacular transfiguration.

As the disciples followed Jesus about Judea and Galilee, they witnessed His amazing ministry. Not only so but they were empowered and sent out among the villages preaching and healing. They actually saw Jesus do what He said He would do and participated in it as His followers. This is what Peter in his sermon at Pentecost had to say about Jesus, “*Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs . . .*” (Acts 2:22). The disciples saw and themselves experienced God's power in Jesus, and they grew in wonder, they grew in confidence.

However, *unfortunately they also grew in arrogant exclusivism*, eventually rebuking one who was healing in Jesus name and wanting to call down fire on a Samaritan village. The problem seems to be that they did not fully understand the nature of discipleship. They followed Jesus but in a sense were not properly following Him. *The nature of discipleship, what it means to follow God truly, is based on the defining role of the master for the follower.* The nature of discipleship is contingent upon the ministry of the master.

2. Christ's Ministry and Commitment to It Even in the Face of Discouragement/Despite Hindrance

Already after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (9:22), Jesus announced to the disciples His ministry is one of suffering, “*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” And again in verse 44, “*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.*”

Knowing His purpose and what that involves, we read in verse 51, “*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” Jesus “set his face”. This is a Semitism, a biblical expression that means resolutely, determined. It clearly indicates the *absolute* nature of the commitment of Jesus to the plan of salvation, His substitutionary atoning death and resurrection.

A. Hindrances: His disciples did not understand.

Jesus, however, had discouragements to face. He was determined to fulfil His ministry despite the disciples' lack of understanding. Jesus said, “*Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into*

human hands. ' But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying" (9:44-45).

B. Additional hindrances: the Samaritans refused Jesus.

Jesus was travelling on the way, *routinely travelled on by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for festivals.*⁴ The quickest route from Galilee to Jerusalem was through Samaria. Jesus sent messengers on ahead of Him into a Samaritan village to get things ready for Him. When the Samaritans, however, found out that Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem, they did not receive Him. Samaritans were antagonistic towards Jerusalem as a place of worship and toward Jews in general as is mentioned in John's Gospel chapter 4. *They were not supportive in general of any activities involving the Jewish religion. So without even considering Jesus' cause, they refused Him hospitality.* The Samaritans' response was not personal; hence there was no reason for the disciples' spiteful retaliation and every reason for Christ's rebuke.

This becomes clearer when we understand that the Palestinian Talmud unjustly vilifies the Samaritans noting that there was a Samaritan village called *Kefar Bish*, "an evil village", so called because the villagers refused hospitality to strangers.⁵

Despite these discouragements and impediments, as recorded within the span of our short text today (they are certainly examples of the growing tension in Israel and conflict with His opponents), Jesus remained committed to the good news of the kingdom, the plan of God for the salvation of humankind.

3. Our Commitment.

Thus believers must always bear in mind that the nature of discipleship takes shape in light of Jesus' ministry, that is, in light of His own commitment. Jesus makes this clear at Peter's confession that He is the Christ. Immediately after announcing He is to suffer, be killed and then rise from the dead, Jesus states, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*" (9:23). As Jesus was committed to His calling, so also must we be committed to our common calling, *to seek God's kingdom and to proclaim it*, that it may be built up in mercy, righteousness, grace, love, and faith.

Three encounters provide Jesus occasion to stress the importance of a disciple's commitment, in three elemental parts, as followers of Christ in our common calling.

⁴ Josephus, *Ant.*XX6.1.

⁵ Palestinian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah*, 5.4, 44d.

A. Son of Man has no place to lay his head – persevering.

“⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ ⁵⁸And 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.’”

Jesus does not mean he has literally nowhere to sleep. But he is speaking figuratively making a statement about His ministry. His work knows no cessation – it is continual work. If we follow Him, we should be ready as the apostle Paul states “*in season and out of season*” to speak to others about our love for Jesus and about His forgiveness, His grace that restores lives and gives a certain hope for the future. The need is great and we need to be committed to the ongoing never-ending nature of the work of the Gospel. To be committed to Christ means we need to be *persevering*.

B. Let the dead bury their own dead – prioritizing.

“⁵⁹To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’”

At first this may seem like an unfeeling request of Jesus. However, we should realize this man had already buried his father. Burials were performed on the day of death; therefore, on that day the man would not have had the opportunity for the encounter with Jesus. The man is referring to the secondary burial when the deceased parent’s bones were gathered and reburied in an ossuary within the tomb. This is an ancient Near East custom linked to respective belief systems. If one, however, knows that in 1st-century Palestine, Rabbinic teaching forbade a person who was mourning the death of a parent from participating in festive social gatherings or leaving town but to mourn during the initial seven days, then a month and for a year till the secondary burial,⁶ then one asks the question why was the man out along the road among the crowd, non-mourners, gathered round Jesus?

In doing so the man apparently decided that obeying rabbinic injunctions was secondary to encountering Jesus; also, he did not view it as disrespecting his deceased father and therefore breaking the fifth commandment. Jesus, in saying “let the dead bury their own dead”, condones the man’s behaviour and decision, essentially pointing out that already the man did honour his father in the first burial, since in the secondary burial the emphasis is on the safe-keeping of remains within the precincts of the family tomb. Others in the

⁶ Byron R. McCane, “Burial Practices, Jewish,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background* 4:173-175, reports that in the case of a parent’s death mourning lasted until the secondary burial and continued restrictions such as not attending festive social gatherings or leaving town. Babylonian Talmud, *Mo’ed, Mo’ed Qatan*. 22b, restricts mourners from joining celebrant groups. Babylonia Talmud, *Nezikin, Semahot*, a later minor tractate treats mourning for the dead extensively. The essay, Byron R. McCane, “‘Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead’: Secondary Burial and Matt 8:21-22,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 31-43, is very useful.

family will have taken care of this. The man would not have been breaking the fifth commandment by postponing the second burial ritual, for the father's bones would, according to Jesus, "be taken care of by the others" already in the family tomb (Jesus phrases this with some critical humour). Essentially the patriarch's bones would still be there when he got back. The burial proper had already taken place; hence priority should necessarily be on proclaiming the kingdom of God.

This is an important lesson for us: not to inflate responsibilities so that our calling to serve Jesus as His disciples is impeded. If we are committed to Jesus, we will strive to see everything in proportion to the very important task of building God's kingdom – do not allow it to be bumped down the list of things to do! To be committed to Christ means that we need to prioritize correctly.

C. No one who . . . looks back is fit for service – undoubting.

⁶¹*Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'* ⁶²*Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'*

Jesus uses this common agrarian activity to point out the importance of continuing what one has started. With the primary occupation being agriculture, timing was important. In Galilee, lower Galilee, primarily wheat was grown. Wheat was sown on ploughed land in early winter, around December, to take advantage of the rainy winter growing season. Interruption in ploughing would negatively affect the entire process. Farming the land required a confidence in and therefore a commitment to the process of growth and schedule of the seasons.

As disciples we must be confident in our calling to follow Jesus; we must be confident that *it is* God's will for us to build His kingdom. We need to be committed to the certainty of our common calling: to declare God's mercy and salvation for all. We must continue what we have started; only then are we fit for the kingdom. We cannot interrupt the process and look back with regret or with doubt. To be committed to Christ means we need to be *undoubting*.

The acclaimed movie entitled *War Horse*⁷ provides some illustration of this. There is a scene with a young boy and his *quarter horse* doing the impossible, ploughing a field for the planting of a cash crop of turnips in an attempt to help the family get out of debt and save the farm. A heavy horse was always used to plough fields, not a light quarter horse. It was an exhausting task for the boy and his animal; nonetheless, *they were undoubting* and did it.

⁷ *War Horse* is a 2011 war drama film set before and during the First World War directed by Steven Spielberg. It is based on the 1982 children's novel by British author Michael Morpurgo. It is a story of the friendship between a horse and its young owner separated by war and of their perilous journeys in an effort to survive and reunite.

What is important to note is that the scene illustrates that the boy was indeed *committed* in his task: he *persevered* in his long arduous task, he *prioritized*, that is, nothing was more important than to save the farm, and he was *undoubting* in the ability of his horse to complete the task.

4. The LORD Is the Builder.

It is *Christ* who calls us to commitment. Any and all fears about being a successful disciple should disappear with this comforting knowledge. Jesus forms our discipleship as we respond to Him. He draws us to Himself by *meeting us at and moving us forward from our preconceptions about servanthood* and then follows with *generous and appropriate equipping*.

A. Jesus draws us to His side wisely.

Jesus is not only aware of but takes a great interest in what people think. He demonstrates this in all of the Gospels, but more so in Luke, for He repeatedly uses popular knowledge as a way of starting discussion and thinking on a topic which He then can teach on.

We know Jesus was aware of what people thought of Him since His disciples told Him when asked (9:18-19) to report what knowledge was already circulating (9:7-9). The people thought He was either John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets. The significance of this emerges when we note that only Luke has these two incidences in the same chapter only nine verses apart; it comes as no surprise then, that our text seems to refer back to the peoples' common opinion by careful allusion and by the use of key words.

Jesus tells the first "would-be follower" that "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*" (9:58). By referring to desert life and itinerant ministry, Jesus alludes to the common opinion that he is John the Baptist. Caringly, Jesus uses this popular knowledge of John's itinerant ministry *as a starting point* to speak *understandably* of what it truly means to follow as a committed disciple – the never-ending work of the gospel requires *perseverance*.

Jesus seems to tell the second "would-be follower" to ignore rabbinic teaching saying ". . . *but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God*" (9:60). By appearing to take the position of lawgiver, Jesus alludes to the common opinion that He is one of the ancient prophets, foremost was Moses. Lovingly, Jesus uses this popular knowledge of Moses' lawgiving ministry *as a starting point* to instruct *clearly* about what it truly means to follow as a committed disciple – the vital work of the gospel requires *prioritization*. In Acts 3:22-23 and 7:37, Jesus is presented as the one Moses spoke about, "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet*" (Deut. 18:15).

Jesus tells the third "would-be follower" that "*No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*" (9:62). By referring to ploughing and dedication, Jesus alludes to the common opinion that he is

Elijah. With tender sensitivity, Jesus uses this popular knowledge of Elijah's calling the ploughing Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21) to follow immediately and not turn back to say goodbye to his parents *as a starting point to teach further* on what it truly means to follow as a committed disciple – to be *undoubting* in our calling and service.

Jesus knows who we are and what we think; He works with us by His Spirit in order to change us, to make the task of discipleship more understandable and desirable! Out of love He corrects us, renews our understanding, and builds a solid foundation for discipleship so that our commitment will be true, strong, and enduring.

B. Jesus equips His disciples.

Jesus calls together the twelve disciples in the beginning of chapter 9 and gives them “*power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases*” (9:1) and the task of evangelism. Just as His disciples were given the ability to remain committed and fulfil what Jesus called them to, so also Christ enables us today. Be assured of this unchanging truth.

Jesus has sent His Spirit, *the Holy Spirit* of power, to indwell all who love and follow Him as His disciples. The Holy Spirit is given to all who believe in order to be a sign and seal of our salvation, to empower us greatly for service so that our commitment will not wane. As we are poured out in Christian labours, the Lord will fill us and provide for us strength and ability beyond human comprehension to persevere, to prioritize, and to serve without any doubt in our calling. Amen.