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Luke 9:51-62

31st Message

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DO YOU REALLY WANT TO FOLLOW?

SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE

Last month a dear friend invited me to a preview showing of a documentary film called *The Hornet's Nest*. The film tells the story of the No Slack Battalion, Bastogne Brigade of the 101st Airborne division as they are sent into the most dangerous Taliban stronghold in northeastern Afghanistan. Barawala Kalet is "a narrow mountain valley that is home to top Taliban leadership. No foreign troops had ever dared to go there."¹ The vision for the film came from Mike Boettcher, who is perhaps our nation's most experienced war correspondent. For three decades Mike has been reporting world conflicts from the front lines for NBC, CNN and ABC News. After the film he told the audience that after experiencing so many conflicts, he drew a line in the sand and wanted to see this story through to its completion. When he made his proposal to NBC, they vetoed it, thinking it was far too dangerous. Mike had already survived a suicide bomber attack and a roadside bomb in Afghanistan, and they didn't want to push his luck any further.

But Mike was not to be deterred. He left NBC and pursued the project on his own. In 2008 he embedded himself, along with his son Carlos, full-time with U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The reason for inviting his son was that, after so many years of being gone 250+ days a year, he wanted a second chance at being a father. I thought to myself, if I had been Carlos would I have risked my life on the front lines of Afghanistan for the chance to rekindle my relationship with my father? Would you follow your father into the front lines of a battle?

That is the question Jesus is asking you today. Will you embed yourself with Jesus as he makes his journey to Jerusalem? Up until now it must have been thrilling to be a follower of Jesus as he taught and ministered throughout Galilee. Imagine Jesus stepping into your world, sailing in your boat, capturing the imaginations of the crowds with his teaching, conquering demons with a word, healing multitudes of their diseases, and bringing the dead back to life. As you are caught up in this tornado of life that heals everything in its path, you can't help but wonder, "Is this Israel's promised messiah who will come to set the world right?" And then Peter says it out loud, "You are the Messiah of God."

It took me seventeen years to come to the same conclusion. I began my journey into prayer at the age of eleven, and over the next five years God became more and more real to me, coming into my world with unique blessings. Finally, in my senior year in high school I was invited to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes Bible study and it was then that I made the decision to follow Jesus.

But that is only the first stage in our journey as followers of Jesus. "It is one thing to believe that Jesus is God's anointed king; it's quite another to discover *how* he brings his reign from heaven to earth, and then decide to follow him anyway."

I. The Final Journey: Jerusalem (Luke 9:51)

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51 ESV)

Jesus knows the time is now fulfilled for him to be taken up, to ascend back to his heavenly Father, and so he must begin his final journey toward Jerusalem. The journey is lengthy (Luke 9:51-19:27) and intense, requiring single-minded focus and total commitment. Whereas miracles were widespread in the earlier chapters, extensive teaching on discipleship, especially in the form of parables, becomes the dominant theme of the narrative journey. The reason the training is so intense and rigorous is due to the *magnitude* of Jesus' mission and the *means* by which it must be accomplished. Jesus is going on a rescue operation to save the world, and to do that he must go right into the hornet's nest: Jerusalem. Jesus was keenly aware of all that would await him there.

The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Luke 9:22)

The fact that he must "set his face to go to Jerusalem" implies that it will take all his resolve to resist the pressures that will bear down upon him from the crowds, the devil and his own disciples to divert him from his mission. So how did he do it?

Luke gives us a clue (*set his face*) by quoting from the words of Isaiah (in what scholars call "The Servant Songs") that prepared Jesus to know exactly *who* he was, *what* he was called to, all that he would experience, and *how* he would get through it.

II. The School for Disciples (Isaiah 50:4-7)

A. The Goal: To learn to speak

**The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens [me];
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught. (Isa 50:4)**

The goal of the servant's education was to learn how to speak in an appropriate way, to "know how to sustain the weary with a word." The servant's words are to be life-giving words, healing words, forgiving words. Unfortunately, we have lost this ability. We live in a world where we are inundated with speech from all corners of the planet. Our technology has given us the capability to multiply our unedited thoughts, personal conversations, and raw emotions and post them in emails, blogs, tweets and Facebook. Yet for all our speech, when was the last time you had a conversation where you connected with someone in a significant way? Throughout the gospels, Jesus never had a conversation that did not connect. In all his encounters, you never hear a cell phone going off pulling people

into another place. Jesus' words always found their mark, "piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

B. The Curriculum: Rejection 101

**The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.**

**I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting. (Isa 50:5-6)**

The good news is that to graduate you only have to take one required course; the bad news is that you are not going to like it. The title of the course is Rejection 101. John writes that Jesus "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). Rejection is painful at all levels, but when you are rejected by those closest to you, it is devastating. Jesus faced rejection from every corner of the nation he came to save, and it did not let up from his birth to the excruciating cross.

As painful as rejection is, it mysteriously opens a window into heaven so that we have an ear to hear to God's voice. Far from rendering the servant ineffective, rejection was instrumental in the servant's training, to give him "a word to the weary." Rejection is the school that makes us compassionate.

C. The Graduation Rate: 100% Guaranteed

**But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame. (Isa 50:7)**

The prophet's words allow you to see the end of the movie before it starts. Jesus, the one who will be God's ultimate Servant, will have all of his Father's resources at his disposal to endure his suffering which makes his destiny secure. For that reason, Jesus is able to set his face like flint. You can endure anything if you know for certain God is with you and is going to see you through.

III. Pushing the Boundaries (Luke 9:52-55)

A. Invitation and rejection

And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. (Luke 9:52-53)

Now that Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, he sends messengers on ahead of him to prepare the way for his arrival in Samaria, much the same as John the Baptist did in the wilderness. It is an assignment of great honor. However, it doesn't take the messengers long to discover that following Jesus is always filled with the unexpected. You can almost hear them grumbling to themselves, "Why in the world are we making the announcement of the king's arrival in Samaria?"

The Samaritans were notorious for rejecting worship of Jerusalem, instead replacing it with their own holy place, Mt. Gerizim. They had altered the sacred Scriptures, incorporating man-made traditions. They had intermarried with foreigners and had vastly different views of the Messiah. Their hostility toward the Jews sometimes broke out into violence. In today's world we would have considered them a cult that had desecrated all that we hold sacred. It's no wonder

that when Galilean Jews made their pilgrimages to Jerusalem, they normally bypassed Samaria and took the longer route through the Transjordan.

But not Jesus—throughout the gospel he is continually pushing his disciples beyond their comfort zone, breaking down every conceivable barrier that divides humanity.

B. Condemnation and rebuke

And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. (Luke 9:54-55)

When the Samaritan village turns the Lord's messengers away, they are filled with holy rage. Given the long history of hostility, we wonder if the Samaritan's rejection of Israel's king will be the final straw and seal their fate in a fiery judgment. James and John certainly think so and volunteer to initiate God's wrath in the name of Jesus. Their suggestion is not without precedent. When the idolatrous king Ahaziah sent troops to apprehend Elijah, God vindicated his servant by having fire consume Ahaziah's troops (Mal 3:1-2). And when Malachi spoke of a new Elijah who would prepare the way of the Lord, he uses the imagery of a "refiner's fire" that would accompany his coming.

Judgment will indeed come, but now is not the time. Sadly, the disciples have ignored the explicit instructions Jesus earlier gave about the appropriate response when faced with rejection. They were simply to walk away, but instead they "act as persons intoxicated with their own sense of power"² and seek to misappropriate Jesus' authority for their own ends. The condemnation they had hoped for lands on their own heads. Jesus' strong rebuke indicates how far the disciples still have to go, and acknowledges how difficult it is for us to embrace the way of the kingdom.

So why do you think Jesus doesn't condemn the Samaritans? Jesus understands that their rejection is a conditioned knee-jerk response, centuries in the making, one that is typical of racial and national prejudices that divide people. When the Samaritans see Jesus, they don't see Jesus, they see Jerusalem and all that the city stands for. Jesus knows you can't break down prejudice head on; rather you have to be subversive. In the next chapter he begins to break down the disciples' prejudice by telling a story about the loving hospitality and sacrificial care demonstrated by a Samaritan traveler (10:33-36). Later we will see in Luke's second volume (Acts 8) how the gospel completely breaks down the walls of prejudice and how many Samaritan villages embrace the message of the gospel with joy as a result (Acts 8:8, 25).

If you become a follower of Jesus, I can guarantee you that he will take you out of your comfort zone to embrace other cultures. And when that happens you should never be discouraged by the initial responses of people.

As we continue to travel with Jesus and his disciples, along the "way" we are privileged to overhear three conversations that he has with potential disciples. The three mini-scenes are arranged chiastically, where the first and third are initiated by a volunteer, and the center where Jesus initiates the call. Jesus' responses are stark and shocking. With each exchange the bar of discipleship is raised higher and higher, until it seems almost beyond our reach. Who is brave enough to continue?

IV. Three Seekers, Three Demands (Luke 9:56 – 62)³

A. The First Seeker: Enthusiastic Volunteer

And they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 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.” (Luke 9:56-58)

As the kingdom spreads throughout Northern Galilee, bringing liberty to captives and healing to all, many are drawn in, eager to join in this new movement. Our first seeker was so moved by what he has observed in Jesus’ ministry, that he makes an unconditional vow to follow Jesus anywhere. One would expect Jesus to be elated by his commitment. Instead he douses his enthusiasm with a bucket of cold water. Jesus sees that he is like the seed sown on rocky ground. Despite his enthusiasm, his faith has no depth and will not be able to stand up to the rejection that could leave him homeless. “You want to follow me *anywhere*? The truth of the matter is ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’” The Son of Man was a popular title for the coming Messiah among first-century Jews. It originated from the book of Daniel and ignited hopes in Israel that the one who was to come would have everlasting dominion, glory and a kingdom over all nations (Dan 7:13-14). As Kenneth Bailey explains, to suggest that the Son of Man would be rejected and homeless, would be shocking to any first-century Jew.³

T. W. Manson points out that the “birds of the air” were an apocalyptic symbol in the intertestamental period referring to the gentile nations. The “fox” was a symbol for the Ammonites who, as Manson says, “were a people racially akin to but politically enemies of Israel.” In similar fashion, Herod’s family (due to Herod’s Idumean parentage) was racially mixed and was always seen by the Jewish population of first-century Palestine as foreign. Jesus calls Herod Antipas “that fox” (Luke 13:32). Manson writes,

Everybody is at home in Israel’s land except true Israel. The birds of the air—the Roman overlords, the foxes – the Edomite interlopers, have made their position secure. The true Israel is disinherited by them: And if you cast your lot with me and mine you join the ranks of the dispossessed and you must be prepared to serve God under those conditions.⁴

Jesus in a veiled fashion may well be saying: Look, if you want power and influence, go to the “birds” who “feather their nests” everywhere. Follow the “fox” who manages his own affairs with considerable cunning. For in spite of your expectations, the Son of man stands powerless and alone. Are you serious in wanting to follow a *rejected* Son of man?⁵

If you know the story, you know that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, no one in an official capacity welcomed him, and Israel’s king was forced to find hospitality outside the city. Then in his darkest hour in Gethsemane, he found no support from his disciples who were asleep; and at his trial they all fled. Discipleship is demanding. Like troops going on a rescue mission, it’s not a comfort station.

Luke records no response from this volunteer, which is his way of inviting you into the story. What will be your response?

B. The Second Seeker: “Let me first...”

To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead

to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59-60)

The key to the text is the meaning of the phrase “bury my father.” Some think the father has just died or is about to; but if that were the case the recruit would not be “on the road” away from home whatsoever. Bailey explains that the phrase is an idiom.

To bury one’s father’ is a traditional idiom that refers specifically to the duty of the son to remain at home and care for his parents until they are laid to rest respectfully...the assumption governing the idiomatic language is that the son has the duty to remain at home unto the death of the parents. Then, and only then, can he consider other options. Here we are dealing with community expectations... Jesus says the spiritually dead can take care of the traditional responsibilities of your local community, but as for *you*, go and proclaim the arrival of the kingdom (the word *you* is emphatic in the Greek text).⁶

There is a supreme urgency about Jesus’ mission. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to venture forth alongside him in his mission to rescue the world; the choppers are ready to take off and are not going to wait. Jesus’ insistence is extreme and unrelenting, there can be no delay in following. If the man waits to follow after “burying his father,” this once in a lifetime opportunity will long be over.

Similarly, when God opens a door and invites us to follow him on a rescue mission for an individual or group of people, the opportunity to give life for the gospel becomes our highest calling and trumps community obligations and expectations. As John Carroll observes, “Freed from duty (even sacred duty) to parents, the seeker will take on the task of a disciple, pointing to the powerful arrival of God’s rule.”⁷ This doesn’t mean that students neglect their schoolwork, or that adults do not strive to be the very best they can be in their careers. But it does suggest that there are times when we must neglect “the good,” in order to give our immediate and full attention to “the best.” And for those who have been called to make their living by the gospel, whether they be missionaries or pastors, Paul’s words to Timothy reiterate Jesus’ demand: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim 2:3-4).

Once again Luke records no response from the one Jesus calls, leaving you with a moment of uncomfortable silence as you ponder the divisions within your own heart. But before you have time to justify your priorities, another volunteer approaches.

C. The Third Seeker: “You’re useless!”

Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:61-62)

To “say farewell” looks like a legitimate request. When Elijah called Elisha, he made what seems to be a similar request and was permitted (1 Kgs 19:20). But Bailey points out that the Greek word (apotassō) translated “to say goodbye” can also mean “take formal leave of someone.” He explains that in Middle Eastern culture it implies that...

The person who is leaving must request *permission* to leave from those who are staying. The point is that the volunteer is asking for the right to go home and *get permission* from “those at home” (i.e. his parents). Everyone listening to the dialogue knows that naturally

his father will refuse to let the boy wander off on some questionable enterprise. Thus the volunteer's excuse is ready-made.⁸

When we consider that in the Middle East the authority of the father reigned supreme, Jesus words must have been shocking to his hearers. But using the metaphor of the plow, Jesus highlights the justification of his demand. A farmer who is plowing his field had best keep his eyes fixed straight ahead. The farmer needs great dexterity to guide his plow, keeping it straight and level with one hand, while constantly guiding his oxen with the other. If he looks back the furrows will be crooked and will greatly impact those who follow after him in the successive plowing and planting. As Bailey observes, "It is not too much to say that the past, present, and future are kept in delicate harmony in the immediate task at hand."⁹ Better to stay out of God's field than create untold damage that must be repaired by those who come after. Like trying to drive a car while constantly looking over your shoulder, the wreckage can be disastrous. This is why Jesus' conclusion seems harsh. "The person who cannot resolve this tension of competing loyalties and keeps turning back to look over his shoulder to see what the family is ordering is judged 'useless' for the kingdom of God."¹⁰

In the next chapter Jesus explains that Israel's fields are getting ready for planting and he expects a plentiful harvest (Luke 10:2). Following Jesus is holy work with eternal significance, therefore the disciple is always looking forward, into the future, planting seeds to be harvested in God's new world.

V. Do You Really Want to Follow?

After experiencing the film *The Hornet's Nest*, I was utterly humbled by the unspeakable courage, supreme discipline, and the ultimate sacrifice made by these troops for our country, to say nothing of the father and son who put their lives on the line to bring the story to us all. The film crystallized for me why Jesus' call to discipleship is so radical.

Following Jesus is not a casual affair; it takes focused commitment, discipline, and a sense of urgency. It's your highest calling in life; nothing is to interfere with it and it will require you to continue training for the rest of your life. But what makes it so rewarding is well illustrated by this father and son. When Mike and Carlos made that decision to embed themselves with our troops regardless of the cost, there was no going back, and something happened to them that was larger than life itself. They discovered a love for others and a holy bond that only soldiers know. And perhaps most important of all, they discovered the depth of sacrifice a son will make out of love for his father. And when they tell the story, you believe every word of it.

When you taste that kind of love, danger seems meaningless.

1. Mike Boettcher, "No Slack Battalion's Deadly Descent," *Afghan 101*, May 2, 2011, <http://afghan101.ou.edu/story.php?sid=67>.
2. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 405.
3. I have leaned heavily on Kenneth Bailey's insights for the background and interpretation of the three dialogues. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes, A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 22-32.
4. T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1937), 72. Quoted in Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 24-25.
5. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 25.
6. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 26-27.
7. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 231.
8. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 27-28.
9. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 31.
10. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 30.