

JESUS AND THE VOLUNTEERS

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By Pastor Stan

Luke 9:56-62

PASTOR STAN WEESE

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INTRO.

-- Let me start today with 2 questions.

-- The first question is this: Can you be a Christian without following Jesus?

-- The NT clearly teaches that Christians are followers of Jesus. Those who are called to know Christ are called to follow Him.

-- And that brings me to the second question: What does it mean to follow Jesus?

That's a critical question. If we agree that being a Christian means that you are a follower of Jesus, then it's essential for us to understand what it means to follow Jesus. That's the question that Jesus addresses in today's passage in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus will encounter three would-be followers, each of whom has a defective view of what it means to follow Jesus. As Jesus corrects their mistaken views, He teaches them and us critical lessons about what it means to follow Him, or in other words, what it means to be a disciple because "follow Jesus" is just another way of saying "be His disciple."

-- So turn in your Bibles, please, to Luke chapter nine.

-- Luke 9 is a watershed chapter in the Gospel of Luke. In this chapter Jesus openly declares to the 12 Disciples that He is the Messiah and then proceeds to identify the two essential aspects about His Messiahship - His death and Resurrection.

And it's in this chapter that Jesus starts the journey that will take Him to that destiny.

v. 51

From this point on Luke's Gospel is about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and to the Cross. Now, what is very interesting and significant is that as soon as Jesus identifies Himself as the Messiah and starts His final journey to Jerusalem He deals with the issue of discipleship and clarifies what it means to follow Him.

-- In verses 57-62 Jesus has a brief conversation with three would-be followers, and in each encounter Jesus corrects a serious misunderstanding of what it means to be His disciple and teaches us what it means to follow Him.

I. THE FIRST ENCOUNTER (VV. 57-58)

-- The first encounter takes place in verse 57.

A. THE VOLUNTEER (57)

-- For us pastors this is the stuff that dreams are made of. Jesus and His Disciples are walking along the road, and a man just comes up to Jesus and volunteers himself to follow Jesus wherever He goes.

It's like someone visiting here this morning and filling out the worship card and checking everything listed on the back. That's what most churches and pastors only dream about. We'd be all over that guy like mosquitoes on a Minnesotan in June. Sign him up quick before he returns to his right mind.

-- You'd expect Jesus to be excited about this guy and to commend him for his exuberant commitment, but you'd be wrong. Strangely enough, Jesus isn't thrilled and doesn't commend the man. Instead, Jesus seems to deliberately throw cold water on the man's enthusiasm.

B. JESUS' RESPONSE (58)

-- Jesus' response here isn't as odd as it might seem at first.

-- I joked that if someone were visiting and checked all the things on the back of the worship card that we'd want to sign him up quick. The fact is that we've had that happen before. The first time someone was here they checked just about everything on the back of the card - the nursery, youth ministry, prayer ministry, offering envelopes. The truth is that I wasn't excited; I was uneasy. I wondered about the person's motivation

and stability.

-- What Jesus sees in this man's enthusiastic volunteerism is not commendable commitment but troublesome shallowness. This man doesn't really understand what it means to follow Jesus. He hasn't thought about what that will involve, like not having a bed to lie down in or having a roof over his head.

C. THE LESSON ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

-- The lesson for us in this encounter is that discipleship is costly. Discipleship isn't only about where you will go but what you're willing to leave behind, what you're ready to sacrifice to follow Christ.

-- Jesus wants us to know up front that there is a cost in following Him. He talks about that just a few verses earlier in this chapter.

v. 23

-- Jesus identifies 2 costs that must be paid by those who follow Him.

1. Self-Denial

-- The first cost is self-denial ("If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself…"). Jesus isn't talking about getting rid of your individuality or personality; He's talking about giving up ownership and control over your life.

The Message paraphrases v. 23 this way: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat - I am."

The Phillips paraphrase says, "If anyone wants to follow in my footsteps, he must give up all right to himself…"

2. Cross-Bearing

-- The second cost in following Jesus is cross-bearing ("…and take up his cross daily and follow me.")

-- Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem and to the Cross, and He says that anyone who follows Him must also take up the cross and follow His example of sacrifice.

v. 24

-- One of the most powerful books on discipleship is a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a young Lutheran pastor and promising theologian in Germany when Adolf Hitler rose to power. Many Christians and churches didn't oppose Hitler, but Bonhoeffer knew that to follow Christ he had to oppose Hitler. Bonhoeffer could have left Germany and lived a comfortable life in the United States, but his commitment to follow Christ kept him in Germany to preach the Gospel and oppose the Nazis. Eventually, Bonhoeffer was arrested and thrown into prison, where he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*. Here are some powerful lines from that discipleship classic:

- "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession… Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."
- "Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost the life of his Son…"

â—• "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Just before the concentration camp where Bonhoeffer was imprisoned was liberated, the Nazi captors executed him by hanging.

Following Christ isn't easy - it was never meant to be. Following Christ will cost you. It will cost you control over your life. You may have to sacrifice personal conveniences and ambitions. But in return you will find a life with purpose and meaning and hope that lasts beyond the grave.

II. THE SECOND ENCOUNTER (VV. 59-60)

-- The second encounter happens in verse 59.

A. THE INVITEE (59)

-- This time Jesus takes the initiative and invites another man to follow Him. The man makes what would seem to be a reasonable response and request: that he wants to follow Jesus but first needs to go and bury his father.

-- There are two differing opinions about what the man is actually intending to do. Some believe that the man's father isn't really dead yet and that what the man is saying is that before he starts to follow Jesus he needs to take care of his father until the father dies and has proper burial and then the man who has been invited will come to follow Jesus.

I'm not convinced that that's what's happening here. One reason I've come to doubt this interpretation is that it takes away the tension in the story too easily. I think it's better to assume that the man's father is actually dead and needs to be buried. In that culture burials were done quickly, often on the same day that a person died. So what this man is saying is that he needs to take care of his obligation to give his father an honorable burial. Then the man will catch up with Jesus and follow Him. It appears to be an understandable and reasonable request, but Jesus' reply to the man is shocking.

B. JESUS' REPLY (60)

-- If this man's father is, indeed, already dead, then Jesus' words appears to be harsh and insensitive. So what's going on here?

1. What Is Not Happening Here.

-- In order to understand what is happening here, we need first to understand what is not happening. Jesus is not saying that families aren't important and that we shouldn't care about our parents and our responsibilities to them. We know that isn't the case because Jesus repeatedly demonstrates His concern for families. Earlier in this chapter He showed compassion for a father with a demon-possessed son; Jesus cast out the demon and gave the son back to his father. In the preceding chapter Jesus raised back to life Jairus' dead daughter. Just before that Jesus had cast a multitude of demons out of the wild man living in the cemetery in Genessaret, and when that man wanted to follow Jesus, the Lord told him to go home instead to tell his story to those in his family and hometown.

2. What Is Happening Here.

-- So what is happening here? Why does Jesus make such an unreasonable response? What's important to keep in mind is that Jesus knows what's in a person's heart. When Jesus deals with people, He deals with them according to the condition of their hearts. When Jesus speaks to someone, He says what that person needs to hear. Jesus tailors what He says to fit the person's condition and need. For example, Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell everything, but when Zacchaeus said that he was going to give away half of his possessions to the poor, Jesus commended him.

-- A key to what's in the heart of the man in this second encounter is the word "first." Jesus is important to this man, but Jesus isn't first. Following Jesus is something this man considers good and important but it isn't his top priority. In forcing this man to choose between burying his father or following Jesus, the Lord is showing what's the top priority in this man's heart. God must hold first place - even if it comes down to a difficult choice like this.

-- Think of it this way: if this man's father had been a godly man and was in heaven and could have advised his son on which way to decide, which choice do you think the father would have urged the son to make? Unquestionably, to go with Jesus.

C. THE LESSON ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

-- The lesson about discipleship that Jesus wants us to learn from this encounter is that He must be first in our lives. In terms of human relationships nothing is more sacred than our relationship with our spouse and our parents, but our commitment to Christ must take priority over even them. If you want to follow Christ, your commitment to Him must be your highest priority.

III. THE THIRD ENCOUNTER (VV. 61-62)

-- The last encounter happens in verses 61-62.

A. ANOTHER VOLUNTEER DISCIPLE (61)

-- Here again is a would-be disciple who comes volunteering to follow Jesus and to whom Jesus responds in what could be taken as an insensitive manner. All this man wants to do is to say "good-bye" to his family. That won't take long - maybe an hour or two. What could possibly be wrong with that?

-- I think the problem that Jesus sees with this man is indicated again in the word "first." This man wants to follow Jesus, but it's not what's first and most important to him. Like the second man, this man hasn't made following Jesus the highest priority and commitment in his life. Jesus makes that clear in the way He replies.

B. JESUS' REPLY (62)

-- Jesus could see into this man's heart and see that the man was torn between following the Lord and staying with his family. If this man had followed Jesus, his heart would have continued its yearning to return to his family.

-- Remember Jesus little parable about the treasure in the field.

Matthew 13: 44 The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid

it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

-- Notice that the man who sells everything he has to buy the field doesn't do so with hesitancy but with joy. He can't wait to sell everything; he sells it all without a second thought.

-- Jesus sees the conflict in this man's heart and says, "You can't go in 2 directions - you have to make a choice. If a farmer wants to plow a furrow and keeps looking back, the row will end up being crooked. But if he fixes his sight on a point straight ahead and keeps focused on it, he'll end up plowing a straight furrow.

C. THE LESSON

-- If you want to follow Jesus, then Jesus must be your absolute aim - everything must be focused on Him - He must be the goal you pursue with all your heart, mind and soul.

CONCLUSION

Close with the NAMB video / Story of Shaun Pillay