

Luke 9:57-62

Barriers to Discipleship

God has always called people to Himself. He called Abraham out of the Mesopotamian city of Ur. Later, He called Jacob and changed his name to Israel. He called Saul to be His king, and later He called David. He called Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and the other prophets. God has always chosen those who would be His. Jesus also called people to Himself. He still does. Some heed the call. Peter, James, and John followed when Jesus called. So did Matthew. But despite the obvious eternal benefits of responding to the call of Christ, many people both then and now do not choose to follow Jesus.

When Jesus called each of His disciples, He always used the same word, *akoloutheo*, in the sense that one was not to come along for the moment, but to make a long-term attachment. Jesus did not call people to follow Him for a little while. They were to go on the entire journey, or not go along at all. This is quite different from some attempts at evangelism today, which base their appeal on emotion and impulse which can quickly fade. The strategic use of music and personal appeal encourage some to make a response to a call which they have not thought through completely. Sadly, when the realities of the Christian life become apparent later, these people can become disillusioned and fall away, or worse yet, believe that since they “prayed a prayer” or went forward at a church service, they are members of the family of God regardless of whether or not their lives reflect a behavior consistent with such a claim.

Jesus never made an emotional appeal to those He called. In fact, He deliberately insisted that people count the cost of following Him, and He held nothing back.

“²⁸For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³²Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.” (Luke 14:28-33).

In other words, Jesus called people not to an event, but a lifestyle. As Martin Luther said, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘repent,’ He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence.” Jesus did not want to discourage His people, but He wanted them to know the truth. If they chose to follow Jesus, they would have enemies - the world, their flesh, Satan. There would be a battle to be fought and a race to be run. There are many reasons people may have to follow Jesus. But there is only one correct reason - because we acknowledge Him as Savior and Lord.

Context

The setting of this account in Luke is unclear. Matthew, in his narrative, has this conversation occurring near Capernaum as Jesus was preparing to cross the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:18-22). Perhaps Luke includes the episode here in his narrative because it fits thematically with Jesus instructing His disciples in preparation for His passion. Jesus had recently been teaching His disciples about humility and mercy, so a lesson in the true meaning of discipleship would not be misplaced. Also, Jesus had just “set out for

Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). His firm commitment to pursuing the course God has called Him to was clearly contrasted with the weak, tepid response of these men.

Jesus was traveling with the usual crowds. Those people included His disciples, as well as those out to find an excuse to have Him killed. Most were somewhere in the middle - amazed, but not yet believing. In this encounter, Jesus had a brief conversation with three men, each of whom professed a desire (or was given the offer) to follow Him and become His disciple. In each case, however, it became clear that these men did not want to pay the price required to receive forgiveness and salvation.

The First Barrier

The first man approached Jesus “as they were going along the road” (v. 57). Making his way through those nearest Jesus, he began his conversation with what, I think, he believed would be a well-received offer. “I will follow You wherever You go” (v. 57) he said proudly. He probably expected Jesus to stop immediately, and with great enthusiasm turn to the others standing around and announce the good news that yet another person had chosen to join their group. Perhaps, the man thought he would be highly praised for making such a generous and open-ended commitment. No doubt people would rush up to congratulate him on his wise decision and laud him for his good judgment.

Matthew recognizes this person as a member of the scribes, “then a scribe came and said to Him” (Matthew 8:19). He was an expert in the Mosaic Law. He was learned and well trained. He worked alongside the Pharisees to ensure that the high standards of the Jewish faith were upheld. The scribes had become notorious as people opposed to Jesus. “The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him” (Luke 6:7), “both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, ‘this man receives sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2), and “the scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour” (Luke 20:19) are examples of how the scribes viewed Jesus.

No doubt he believed he would be a prized addition to this rabbi’s humble little flock of fishermen, zealots, and tax collectors. Perhaps having seen the miracles, he believed he was stepping up in following a better teacher. In Matthew’s narrative he addressed Jesus as “teacher” indicating he at least acknowledged that Jesus was worthy of being learned from. In fact, since Jesus had regularly spoken out against both the scribes and Pharisees, this man must have clearly understood that his decision would be one from which he could not go back. He was looking for a long-term commitment. His offer echoed the plaintive cries of Ruth to Naomi, “where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Having chosen to become a disciple of Jesus, he could never return to being a scribe for the Pharisees.

Despite the apparent allure of such a valuable defector, Jesus was not convinced. After all, we know that Jesus knew the hearts of men. “Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men” (John 2:24). Jesus knew that this particular scribe was interested in improving his own lot in life by following a more “amazing” teacher. Like many today, he wanted to be in the center of the action, and he believed that this rabbi would allow him to do just that.

The scribe must have been surprised by the response he received. Rather than commending him, Jesus answered, “foxes have dens and birds of the air of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to

lay his head” (v. 58). In this enigmatic statement, Jesus appropriated His favorite title for Himself. He called Himself the Son of Man. He claimed to be the Messiah. He acknowledged that He was certainly worth following, but if the scribe hoped for a life of ease, he was mistaken.

Like any great teacher, Jesus used an illustration that was easily identifiable by His audience. Israel was populated by foxes that sheltered in holes in the ground on the outskirts of settlements coming out at night only to feed. Birds were ubiquitous. Both of these had more stable living conditions than God incarnate. Jesus wandered. Jesus was born in a stable and would die on a cross. Following Him was not the easy life.

We have already seen this to be true. Jesus spoke from experience. When He taught in the synagogue of his home village of Nazareth, “they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (Luke 4:29). When he restored the demon possessed man in Gerasene to himself, “all the people of the country of the Gerasenes and the surrounding district asked Him to leave them” (Luke 8:37). Even when He simply asked for a place to stay on His way to Jerusalem, “they did not receive Him” (Luke 9:53). Eventually the crowds would cry out “crucify Him” (Matthew 27:22).

When Jesus sent out His disciples, He had given them this chilling admonition, “¹⁶Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues; ¹⁸and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. . . . ²¹Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. ²²You will be hated by all because of My name” (Matthew 10:16-18, 21-22). The disciples needed to hear this because Jesus knew, “it is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher” (Matthew 10:25).

Self-denial is fundamental to discipleship. This scribe typified the rocky soil, “who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). We cannot ever come to Christ for what we might gain. Instead we must come only with the realization of what we must lose - our guilt for sin.

The Second Barrier

The second conversation came immediately after the first. It was with a man who had attracted the attention of Jesus. Probably he had been following Jesus for some time, and now Jesus was ready to have him join the inner circle of disciples. It is likely that the man had been standing there listening. In any case, Jesus looked at him and said, “follow me” (v. 59). This was the same call that went to Peter, James and John. It was the same call to which Matthew responded. In this particular instance, the response was not that he “left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:11) or that he “got up and followed him” (Matthew 9:9), but rather the man said, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father” (v. 59).

This seems a reasonable request. Indeed, not to allow such a thing seems callous and insensitive. In fact, this particular duty was foundational to Jewish culture.

When Abraham died, “his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre” (Genesis 25:9).

The same was true for Isaac. He “breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him” (Genesis 35:29).

And Joseph, “¹²thus his sons did for him as he had charged them; ¹³for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre, which Abraham had bought along with the field for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite” (Genesis 50:12-13).

In fact, only a person serving as high priest or someone taking the vow of a Nazarite was permitted to be excused from participating in the funeral ceremonies of their father.

So why was Jesus so unwilling to allow this man to mourn for and participate in the burial rituals for his father? Many explanations have been given. Some commentators argue that Jesus was just about to leave, and the man had to make a decision to go now or never. Others suggest that Jesus knew that the noisy, mournful funeral would not be conducive to the new disciple’s spiritual growth. Still others insist that following Jesus must be an unconditional commitment, and Jesus is emphasizing that one cannot come to Christ with any reservations whatsoever. Any of these may be the case, but also a possible clue is given in John’s account of the death of Lazarus.

“¹Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. . . .
⁶So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was. ⁷Then after this He said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again. . . .¹⁷So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days” (John 11, 1, 6-7, 17).

As we learned when discussing the widow at Nain whose son had died, because of the hot and dry conditions of Israel, burial were usually held the day of or day after a person died. Jewish laws stated that the soul is in torment until the body is buried, so any delay was forbidden. That this man was following Jesus, and not at his dying father’s bedside, perhaps indicates that his father was not yet dead. The man wanted Jesus to wait until his father eventually died, and then he would follow Him and become His disciple.

Jesus was about to travel to Judea. He was going away from Galilee and, if this man followed, he perhaps feared he might lose out on whatever inheritance might be coming to him when his father died. Maybe he had other brothers who would claim his share. Possibly he was an only son who looked to come into a small fortune. In any case, he wanted to delay his commitment to Jesus until he had inherited whatever wealth and property was coming to him.

The man was the epitome of “the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Luke 8:14). The man was willing to follow Jesus, but only on his own terms - only when he was comfortable financially and had nothing more to gain from this world. He would not leave his potential earthly reward behind and follow Jesus to an eternal reward “where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matthew 6:20).

Jesus answered, “allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God” (v. 60). This was not a prohibition against attending funerals. Nor was it a callous remark that people are to be uncaring when loved ones pass away. After all, “Jesus wept” at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). Instead it is an exhortation to value things of the next world over things of this world. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with personal wealth. Affluence is not a sin. But it can mislead us into a state of complacent satisfaction. It has to do with values and priorities. After all, “no servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Luke 16:13).

The Third Barrier

Finally, a third man entered the conversation. “I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say goodbye to those at home” he offered (v. 61). This man thought he had improved on the offer of the previous man by not waiting to receive his inheritance before following Jesus. He was ready to go now. He did not need to wait. He simply wanted to go home and let his family know he was leaving.

Again, this seems a reasonable request. But Jesus, knowing his heart, did not accept him with this condition. Perhaps Jesus knew that if the man returned home, the impulsiveness of his decision would become apparent, and he would never return. Perhaps Jesus knew that the man’s devotion to his family would be greater than his devotion to Jesus. Fear of being outcast by those he loved, the man might choose never to become a follower of Jesus. Again we must remember that Jesus knew men’s hearts and the power that other things and other people have over them. That is why He said, “if anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). The word hate is relative in this context. It means to hate in relation to our love for Jesus. We are not literally to hate our family. Rather we are to love Jesus so much, that in comparison it would seem as if we hated them.

Jesus answered with a paraphrase from the Greek writer Hesiod who had written in his *Works and Days* that a you should be a person “who will attend to his work and drive a straight furrow and is past the age for gaping after his fellows, but will keep his mind on his work.” That had become a popular Jewish proverb, which Jesus states plainly. “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (v. 62). This was an agrarian society. They all knew that a person cannot plow a straight furrow looking back over his shoulder. The plowman must be focused and committed to the job at hand. There was a task to be done, and it required full attention. It is impossible to serve with a divided heart. Such, Jesus claimed, was the call to discipleship.

Our families are precious. We are commanded (though I hope it does not come to that) to love them. But we also know that “that friendship with the world is hostility toward God” (James 4:4). As John writes, “¹⁵do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. ¹⁷The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17). This man loved Jesus, perhaps, but he did not love him more than his relationships. Recall the fate of Lot’s wife, “But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt” (Genesis 19:26). Putting relationships before commitment to Jesus was a barrier to discipleship.

Scripture does not describe the ultimate eternal destiny of these men. Perhaps eventually they made an eternal commitment to follow Jesus. What seems clear in the immediate, though, is that like the rich young ruler, they each probably went away “very sad” (Luke 18:23). The issue was not whether or not these men were qualified to follow Jesus, but whether or not they were fully committed to do so. Each of them believed they were ready to follow Jesus, but it turned out each of them had something within that prohibited their doing so. Ultimately the criteria had been set forth by Jesus, Himself, “²³if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me . ²⁴For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23-24)

Take Aways

Reflect on your commitment to Jesus. Is it hindered by a desire for personal comfort? Is it limited because of your concern for financial prosperity? Are there relationships that supercede your relationship with your Savior?