

## About Discipleship

Luke 9:51-62

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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There's more to this pair of Jesus stories than you think. At first glance, they don't look connected. But when you dig in you find out: they really are. They're both about discipleship; they just come at it in different ways.

This is a critical point in the Gospel. Jesus has made the final turn towards Jerusalem, both in his mind and in his journey. The literal phrase in the original is, "When the days of his ascension were completed, he turned his face resolutely to Jerusalem." The point to the thing is that Jesus knew it was time to enter into the last phase of his earthly ministry. He was resolute – he was going to go to Jerusalem, no matter what. You know that in that time, you'd probably be walking, so you could only travel maybe 15 to 20 miles in one day. From reading the passages just before, it appears he was in Bethsaida; that meant a trip of 90 to 100 miles, which would probably have taken 5 or 6 days. He'd need places to stay. So he sent out an advance team to find those places for him. You know, we get online and find a motel or hotel to stay in, no problem. Probably even get a discount! And in our country, there are laws that guarantee that if there's a room open, and your money's good, you can't be turned down.

But it wasn't like that in Jesus' day. Bethsaida is in northern Israel. In that area, there were lots of people called *Samaritans*. You know these people; Luke even has a story about a "good Samaritan." You remember why he was "good?" He was good because he took care of a man injured on the road, *even though that man was a Jew*

from Judea. Why was that “good?” Because the Samaritans and Jews *hated* each other. The Samaritans were the people who didn’t get sent away by the Assyrians way back there in 722 B.C. They stayed in the land, and they held onto the old religion. Meanwhile, the people who were sent to Assyria, and whose families returned later, brought with them a new way of looking at their faith. It evolved into the synagogue system. Sacrilege! The Samaritans were convinced they were right, and that these new-fangled ways to worship God were WRONG! We have the true religion! None of this “Contemporary Worship” for us! The Jews who had returned from Assyria couldn’t understand the hostility; so they responded with hostility, and went back to claiming that the only true place to worship God was *in Jerusalem*. That’s sort of like, the only way to be baptized is to be immersed! Except it was worse; sometimes, there was actually physical violence between the two groups.

So I guess we shouldn’t be surprised when we hear that one of the advance teams couldn’t find a place for Jesus to stay among the Samaritans. I suppose Jesus thought that, since these folks believed they were really close to God, really knew what God wanted, they’d know who he was, and they’d be only too happy to host him. But no! – he was headed towards *Jerusalem*, and they couldn’t support that. That’s not a guess, that’s clear from the text, which says “they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”

You know, we have this picture of “following” as being about actually *walking behind* Jesus, right there in his caravan. But it has to be more than just walking; look at the reaction of Jesus’ closest disciples when they get the word of the rejection by the

Samaritans. “Hey Jesus,” they say, “let us call down fire from heaven and burn ‘em up!” The translation hides something; the words do mean “let us call down fire,” and it’s the disciples who want to do it. They assume it’s the right thing to do. Jesus never thought along those lines. So he turned and got on the boys a little bit. What’re you guys thinking? And then the telling words, “Then they went on towards another village,” which we assume was on the way to Jerusalem. The disciples were reacting to this thing as a *rejection* of Jesus. Which it probably was. We don’t know how he managed to get a room for the night. Yet our Lord didn’t bring down wrath on them; he just kept moving along. For the Samaritans, it was an opportunity lost.

You and I have many opportunities to “walk with” our Lord. How many do we miss? It’s not enough to say, “Yes, I am a disciple of Jesus,” and then refuse to follow. Following involves giving something of yourself. The Samaritans that were approached by Jesus’ advance team had a chance to give of themselves, in the form of giving him a place to stay. I might add that they had a chance to give of themselves in forgiveness. To give Jesus, one of those *Jews*, a place to stay would have amounted to forgiving that old grudge. When you get a chance to do those things, especially for somebody important to you, don’t you jump at the chance? But when you don’t take the opportunity, you reject the person you could have helped. Essentially, the Samaritans were rejecting God; they were rejecting the one God sent, who needed their help. They were proving they weren’t good followers of God at all. If we ignore the opportunities we have to “follow” Jesus, then are we any better than those Samaritans? We don’t get that many opportunities to help God; we’d better be ready to jump on them when they come.

The story moves along down the road, and I think the next two verses go with this first story. One of the ones with him says, "I will follow you," as if to say, "Don't worry about those Samaritans." Jesus has the final word. "'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'" That's a comment on what just happened. It's like Jesus is saying, "Even the animals get a place to stay! But you Samaritans, you didn't recognize the Son of Man." If they'd have been clear on who Jesus was, they'd have been ready to help, and maybe even to follow.

So we pick up on the theme of following, of discipleship, in the next verses. It's Jesus who says to one of those on the road with him, "Follow me." You know that the word "disciple" actually means "follower," though with a heavier, more involved meaning, something like being an apprentice. Jesus is trying to make disciples here. He says, "Follow me," but immediately this man begins making excuses. "Yeah, I'll go; but hang on a minute, I gotta do a funeral for my dad." The next guy says, "Yeah, I'll follow; but let me go and do my good-byes." You know what those two have in common? They think first of the things of their own life, the worldly things.

Isn't that a little harsh? I mean, it's your father's funeral we're talking about! Isn't that kind of a violation of "Honor your father and your mother?" Jesus seems pretty heartless. And as for the other man, Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." That's even harsher when you consider what the original means. It means that this person "is not appropriate for" or "is not right for" the kingdom. Being fit for something! – well, you can always make yourself fit, sort of like getting in shape. But if you're "not *right for*" – that's different. That's a statement

that maybe you'll never be a follower. You just can't. You don't have it in you. You're not THAT person. In other words, you'll never make it into the Kingdom.

Jesus makes it all clear in the last thing he says. That's a good principle, by the way: look at the last thing Jesus says, in a section of scripture, and you'll usually have a good idea of what the whole thing was about. The last thing he says is, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for" – is *right* for – "the kingdom of God." Yet, these men he's addressing *haven't yet put their hand to the plow!* The message is, "Once you commit to me, don't look back." I'm sure it was a devastating message to them. It's even more devastating to us.

See, modern Christians like us, and I fear, especially us Presbyterians, do an awful lot of looking back. You have to think in agricultural terms to get the full drift of what Jesus said. When you're plowing with an ox or a donkey, you can't look behind you, at what you just plowed. You have to constantly be looking ahead *in order to plow the way you're supposed to*. If you keep looking back, you might hit a large rock, or you might plow over the same soil, or you might have to re-plow an area because you didn't go straight. We do spend a lot of time looking back. Quick joke: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: 1 to change it, and a committee of at least six, from each group in the church, to remember how *good* the old bulb was. And yet, if you want to follow Jesus, you're going to have to do some work, some plowing. In order to do it well, *you have to look ahead, not behind*. THAT is the power of this pair of passages. The Kingdom of God is already breaking into the world. Do we want to follow Jesus, and help him establish the Kingdom? If we do, are we ready to give of

ourselves? to plow straight ahead? to not look back? Powerful questions, as we

ourselves move along down the road...