

## Luke 9:51-62

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*<sup>51</sup> When the days were approaching for him to be taken up, Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup> He sent messengers ahead of him. They went and entered a Samaritan village to make preparations for him. <sup>53</sup> But the people did not welcome him, because he was determined to go to Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup> When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?" <sup>55</sup> But he turned and rebuked them. "You don't know what kind of spirit is influencing you. <sup>56</sup> For the Son of Man did not come to destroy people's souls, but to save them." Then they went to another village. <sup>57</sup> As they went on the way, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." <sup>58</sup> Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." <sup>59</sup> He said to another man, "Follow me!" But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." <sup>60</sup> Jesus told him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." <sup>61</sup> Another man also said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say good-bye to those at my home." <sup>62</sup> Jesus told him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Few things annoyed my dad more than when we would sit in the McDonald's drive-thru and I would ask for a cheeseburger *with no onions*. According to him, if you asked for customization on your burger, they would take longer to get you your sandwich. I'm not sure that was accurate, but when he worked at McDonald's as a teenager, burgers were made in bulk—they weren't crafting them to order, and he figured they were operating the same way still. I remember one particular occasion when he told me I *was* getting onions, and I protested, "But Burger King says, 'Have it your way!'" "Yes, and this is McDonald's," my dad replied. Now, sometimes, he was right, and we would have to pull ahead and wait longer, *supposedly* because I had asked for no onions. But I didn't really care if we had to wait a few minutes extra, I wanted it *my way*.

Of course, today, there's no question that just about any fast-food chain will make you your food to order, exactly as you order it. And so, I love the little kiosks that many fast-food chains have today. You select your sandwich, and all the little customization options for extra toppings pops up, guaranteeing that you can order your food exactly as you like it. You can have it *your way*.

There's nothing inherently wrong with customizing, personalizing, having things your way. But where we run into trouble is where we get used to picking and choosing the way we want things to be. We get used to having this kind of power and start to think that we have the same kind of power to pick and choose the kind of Jesus-following, the kind of discipleship that we prefer. To take the call of Jesus to follow Him and start tossing out things we don't like about that call, tailoring our discipleship *around our lives* and not the other way around. The truth is, there are many lengths to which we would not go to be disciples of Jesus. But thanks be to God, there were no such limits on Jesus' devotion to making sure that we could be called His disciples. The theme we'll consider today is:

### **Have It Your Way?**

- I. *Our way* only leaves us useless for God's Kingdom
- II. *Jesus' way* is to use God's Kingdom for us

In our sermon text this morning, we encounter three different people who are in the process of following Jesus, but they were three people who wanted their own *personalized* kind of following.

They wanted to be Jesus' disciples, and they wanted it *their* way. The first individual comes up with this great offer: ***"[Lord,] I will follow you wherever you go."*** "What great faith," we might think. "What devotion, what commitment!" But perhaps the offer was a little too easily spoken. Perhaps he had a little bit too much self-confidence. Perhaps this man assumed that following Jesus was not going to involve any cost or difficulty. And Jesus' reply made clear that there was indeed a cost.

The second potential follower makes an offer that sounds reasonable. ***"Lord, first let me go and bury my father."*** A sensible thought. Taking care of one's parents is certainly a worthy cause, perhaps even a good reason to delay in following Jesus. And so, Jesus' response is shocking, ***"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."*** The reality is that while it might sound to us that this man's father was dead and he was simply waiting for the funeral, that wouldn't have been the case. In those days, a person was buried the day they died, and if that were not possible, then certainly the next morning. His father was not dead, he was alive! And here was a man that simply wanted to spend time with his family before committing to a life of discipleship. Still sounds admirable, but not even this priority superseded seeking *first* the Kingdom of God.

The third person kind of hedges his offering a little bit: ***"I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say good-bye to those at my home."*** Did you catch that, ***"But first"***? We all know that one, even children know it. "Pick up your toys." "Ok dad, but first let me finish this movie." "Go clean your room." "I will mom, but first let me beat this level in my video game." We've all said things like that, and regardless of what reasons we give for our delay in following orders, we're really saying, "My priorities are what I want to do, not what you tell me to do." And so, this man also was saying, "Sorry Jesus, I'll get to you, but first, I got my own things to do."

Three people in our text who are given the call to follow. But did you notice in our reading that we never actually hear if any of these three actually listened? Did they take their calls seriously and faithfully, dropping all to follow Jesus, or did they simply walk away? Luke doesn't reveal their responses to us because Luke is interested in giving us more than a simple history lesson about what happened to three people 2,000 years ago. Instead, Luke is focusing the very question on you. On me. What's important is not necessarily how these people responded, but how we respond when called.

Are we willing to sacrifice financial security and comfort to be a Christian? Is the work of the Kingdom really *our* first priority? Are we the ones looking back or to the side? This text calls for us to consider for *ourselves* this question: Are we really *following* Jesus, or have we created our own personal kind of discipleship? In other words, as we follow Jesus, do we demand that we ***Have It Our Way?***

It's an important question to consider, because, make no mistake—it's not only the pastor who has a call from the Lord. Every one of us has been given the call to follow Jesus. We have been washed clean in our Baptisms, we have heard the Word, we have received His body and blood—the faith has been given to each of us! Perhaps we have even made the statement like that first person: ***"Lord, I will follow you wherever you go!"*** In fact, if you were confirmed in a Lutheran Church, you were likely asked on that day: ***"Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?"*** And if you weren't confirmed as a child in a Lutheran Church, but instead joined later on in adulthood, you were likely asked something like: ***"Do you intend to continue in the confession of this Church, to make diligent use of the means of grace, and to lead a***

*sober, righteous, and godly life, even unto the end?"* And whether you were a child or an adult, you answered the same: *"I do so intend, with the help of God."* Or, ***"I will follow you wherever you go!"***

Well, how have you done? Have you lived up to your promise? God has called each one of us, and in one way or another each one of us have made a commitment to follow Christ to our dying day. And because of that, the words at the end of our text stand out as rather ominous. ***"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*** Jesus is saying that those who have been called to follow Him *also* might not be suitable for the Kingdom of God. How can that be? How can that happen?

It happens when we create our own definition of discipleship, when we want to follow Jesus and ***Have It Our Way***. Do we do this? Is it really so easy to create our own definition of discipleship? To take some of what Jesus says but not other things? To disregard the clear Word of God to do this or not do that, as easily as we might remove onions from our burger? Every one of us here, if we stopped to think for two seconds, could come up with one, or two, or one-hundred times where we have disregarded God's Word and done things ***Our Way*** instead.

There's a good example of that in our text, too. Jesus had been passing through a certain Samaritan village, and apparently because they could sense that He wasn't interested in lingering there for a time, but had his face set on Jerusalem, they would not welcome Him. The audacity! The disciples thought, *"This would be a good time to recreate Old Testament history! Let's do what Elijah did and call down fire from heaven and burn these sinners to a crisp!"* But that's not what Jesus thought. He rebuked them: ***"The Son of Man did not come to destroy people's souls, but to save them."***

And that's part of our calling too, isn't it? To see every lost sinner as a precious soul that Jesus died to save. To see in every interaction the opportunities that God is giving us to proclaim the reason for the hope that is in us. But do we see those things? Or are we like the disciples, and at the first suggestion of an insult, immediately we're wishing evil upon them? Or maybe it doesn't even rise to that extreme, but maybe even *worse* is that we can be so indifferent. At least the disciples felt something, but how often are we surrounded by people that are on the way to hell, and we don't care? We figure, "I believe my thing, and they believe theirs, and in the end we'll figure out who's right." And so, we've taken Jesus' call to ***"make disciples of all the nations,"*** (cf. Matthew 28:18) and we couldn't care enough to strive to make disciples of our own neighbors, or even our own families.

The truth is, each one of us wants to follow Jesus, but we want to ***Have It Our Way***. We want to do it on our own terms. And ***Our way only leaves us useless for God's Kingdom***. Again, that last verse ought to sound as ominous to us as it did to its original hearers: ***"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*** To be looking in two different directions—Jesus' Way and My Way—that leaves us unfit for the Kingdom of God. Literally: useless, unsuitable.

Now, we ought to work on a definition here, because there might be some confusion. When the Bible speaks about ***"the Kingdom of God,"*** it's not talking about heaven. The Kingdom of God is Jesus Christ's gracious rule in the hearts of sinners in order to bring them to heaven. You can think of any of Jesus' parables that begin, ***"The Kingdom of God is like..."*** and then what follows is going to be a description of how Jesus works to save people like you and me. And what are you and I like? We are unfit, useless, unsuitable for Jesus' reign in our hearts, because we're sinners, we simply want things

our way, and that's often not the same as Christ's way. But what is Jesus' way? **Jesus' way is to use God's Kingdom for us.** While we are so distracted by our desperate desire to dictate our own terms, Jesus is undistracted in taking broken sinners like us in order to make us fit for heaven.

Consider the first verse of our text: ***"When the days were approaching for him to be taken up, Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem."*** Think for a moment of some of the difficult experiences you've gone through in your life. Now think how much more difficult they would have been had you known ahead of time all that you were going to have to go through. I often think it a tremendous blessing that the Lord doesn't allow us to see into the future. It would terrify us. But Jesus *could* see the future. He could see every step that lay before Him. He knew exactly what was coming, and despite all that, our text says, ***"Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem."*** The word there in Greek is revealing: it means to make something steadfast and immovable, like setting a post into concrete.

Now, Jesus had something wonderful to look forward to. He would be ascending to His heavenly Father, but He knew that between now and that glorious reunion lay a horrible ordeal. Christ's going to the Father meant a pilgrimage through Gethsemane, Calvary, and Joseph's tomb. Jesus' rock-solid determination was evidence of His great love for you and great patience toward you as you insist on things *your* way. He determined to do things *His* way, and nothing would sway Him from His mission. As He said, ***"The Son of Man did not come to destroy people's souls, but to save them."***

So many people have the wrong idea about God as if He were nothing but a cruel judge waiting for the first opportunity to pounce upon a sinner and condemn him. But nothing could be further from the truth! The Apostle Peter writes, ***"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*** (2 Peter 3:9)

God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4) That is why He is patient with us, just as He was patient with the Samaritans and with His disciples. He did not destroy those unbelieving Samaritans, and He did not cast out His blood-thirsty disciples either. Nor will He cast us aside—us, those undeniably unfit for His Kingdom. After all, He says, ***"The Son of Man did not come to destroy people's souls, but to save them."*** Yes, that includes you.

How patient our Savior has been toward us! Throughout lives marked by sin and disobedience and rebellion and an insistence on doing things *our* way, our Lord has continued to be with us. Every day, from the rising of the sun to its setting, through the long watches of the night—He is there. Each day—when we cry to Him in repentance that we have failed again, that we have fallen again, that we have sinned again—He hears us. And He responds each time, "Be of good cheer. You are forgiven."

So, let's take a step back from our lives with all of its distractions, from all of the opportunities to customize our lives according to our own terms. And let's take a bit more time to think about Jesus' way savor the grace, the love, the long-suffering patience that our Savior has shown to us. And then, we'll see that each new day brings us opportunities to embrace Jesus' call to be His disciples. What a privilege, that God has identified those unfit for His Kingdom, and then used that Kingdom to bring us to faith, to call us as His disciples, and to assure us that life is ours. Let us be determined then, to receive this call and follow Him who is ***"The Way, the Truth, and the Life."*** (John 14:6) Amen.