

Bringing Jesus to Your World

The Cost of Bringing Jesus to Your World Luke 9:51-62

When I was 17 years old, I found myself at a crossroads in my life. Raised in a Christian home, I gradually began to compromise my faith during a few of my teen years. I knew I was walking the fence, but somehow didn't know what to do about it.

One summer, I went on a mission trip to Europe. The only reason I got accepted with this group was because my parents were going on the same trip. I guess they figured that if my parents were there too, I couldn't get into too much trouble. But God knew why I was there. He knew that he wanted to deal with my heart and confront me with the cost of bringing Jesus to my world. And he did. It was that summer that I laid aside my excuses and decided that if Jesus were for real, then he deserved my entire life.

If we are to effectively bring Jesus to our world, we must live out four areas of discipleship. The first one is this:

As disciples we must be willing to endure rejection. (Luke 9:51-56)

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).

Jesus "set his face" to go to Jerusalem. This is an Old Testament expression meaning "to determine in one's heart" to do something. Jesus is a man of purpose. His journey to Jerusalem is a journey of destiny. It is there that he will both meet his fate of death and his victory of resurrection. And you and I are called to have that same focused purpose in life. Jesus knew he was going to be rejected. He also knew his followers would experience rejection. That is part of the cost of bringing Jesus to our world. We must be willing to endure rejection by others who refuse the message of God's grace. But apparently, some of these disciples weren't in such a mood! Here's what happened:

And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village. (Luke 9:52-56)

Though Jesus has his eyes fixed on his destination, Jerusalem, he seems to go out of his way at times in getting there. In fact, if you were to map his journey on *Mapquest*, you'd discover that he doesn't take the most direct route, but rather the "scenic" route. Here he passes through Samaria. For the Jews, these people were traitors to orthodox Judaism, nothing but religious half-breeds. The Samaritans were the result of intermarriage with pagan nations. Consequently, the orthodox Jew viewed the Samaritans as religious outcasts. *But Jesus reaches out to them, in spite of being rejected.*

We see in verse 53 the kind of reception the disciples have: *“but the people there did not welcome him.”* Why? Because Jesus was heading towards Jerusalem. The Samaritans had their holy place of worship, Mt Gerizim. And the Jews had theirs, in Jerusalem. Clearly, Jesus’ intention to go to Jerusalem rather than to Mt Gerizim didn’t win him points among the Samaritans.

Immediately, the disciples have a knee-jerk reaction. “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” Feeling pretty confident because of their successful mission recorded in the first part of this chapter – where they were able to cast out demons and work miracles – these disciples now think they can call down fire from heaven! They’re getting pretty cocky!

The two disciples who said this were James and John. They were known as the “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). We’re not quite sure how they got this nick-name, but it may have been because of their fiery dispositions. After all, they probably thought, the prophet Elijah did this as recounted in 2 Kings 1. Why shouldn’t we do the same?

However, Jesus rebukes the disciples. We’re not told what he said to them. Maybe he reminded them of his words in Luke 4 as he quoted Isaiah 61:1-2. This is the year of the Lord’s favor, not the “day of vengeance of our God.” This is still the age of grace, not judgment, a day of God’s favor, not condemnation. Elsewhere John (one of these “sons of thunder”) later states, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.” And Peter reminds us (and he was also here among these disciples!),

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Some in society write Christians off as angry, pharisaical bigots who want to reform societal norms. Many view Christians as intolerant and inflexible. Our tendency may be to enter in to the fray with a combative spirit. The disciples respond: “Let’s wipe those foolish people off the face of the earth.” But that is not the way of the Jesus follower. When Jesus was on the cross, suffering at the hands of an angry mob, his response was still one of forgiveness: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” There will come a time of judgment. But in the present, our message is one of grace and forgiveness.

But here’s the key point: To effectively bring Jesus to our world, you and I must be willing to endure rejection without becoming defensive. If we are constantly afraid of being rejected, we will never share the gospel with others. James and John, and for that matter, this entire band of disciples needed to move into hostile territory, leaving the results in God’s hands rather than taking the unfavorable response of the Samaritans into their own hands.

For me personally, this is one of my biggest obstacles to bringing Jesus to my world. With the way I’m built, it’s relatively easy for me to stand here each week and teach God’s Word to a relatively kind, understanding, receptive crowd of people. But to move into the lives of those I already sense are going to be hostile – like these Samaritans – we’ll that’s much more difficult. Some months ago God led me to visit the Top of the Hill tavern just up the street here on Glisan. I sensed He was prompting me to step in, spend time with those who frequent that bar, and share

the love of Christ. I want to tell you that I fought with God for several hours about that. I didn't *want* to take that step. And if they had rejected me, I may have been like these "sons of thunder" wanting to call down fire from heaven and destroy every bar and tavern in the city of Portland! But by God's grace, that wasn't the scenario. The bar owner even invited me to come back again! But in order to take that step, I had to get over my fear of rejection.

As disciples we must eliminate self-confidence. (Luke 9:57-58)

Not only must we get over our fear of rejection, we must eliminate self-confidence. This seems to be what Jesus is saying in verses 57-58.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

According to the same account in Matthew, this man is a scribe, an expert interpreter of the law. He is also cocky and self-confident: "I will follow you wherever you go!" Being a Jewish scribe, he probably thinks that to follow Jesus is like following a rabbi. In that day, to follow a rabbi meant simply to follow along behind the rabbi, listening to what he had to say. But beyond that, there were few if any demands placed upon the disciple.

There are a lot of Christians like that today. "Oh sure, I'll follow Jesus...I'll go to church once or twice a month and read my daily devotional guide ... at least twice a week." They are what James the brother of Jesus calls "auditors" of the Christian life. They come to weekend services, they like to listen and discuss the Bible. But it all stops there. When it comes down to it, they don't want to make a commitment. They don't want to be inconvenienced. "After all, if I make a definite commitment to Jesus or to His people, I might not follow through!" they reason. So they stand on the sidelines.

But to follow Jesus is *not* like following a Rabbi. It is more like following a prophet. While the rabbi of Jesus' day was part of an established community with a steady income and few demands made upon his followers, the prophet had an uncertain existence. While foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

In order to bring Jesus to our world, we must eliminate self-confidence and be ready for self-sacrifice. The demands of Jesus Christ in our lives are not "politically correct;" they are radical and extraordinary. They cut across everything that our society would call reasonable and acceptable. Such a call to discipleship is not a type of "hobby," something we can enjoy on the side. Discipleship is not an add-on to an already busy life. It's a revolutionary call to personal commitment 24/7. Discipleship is not a casual affair. For the Christ follower, it is an urgent call to self-sacrifice.

As I look back on my life as a disciple, I could pretty well summarize it as God gradually eliminating self-confidence and replacing it with God-confidence. And those closest to me can tell you that I have quite a ways to go. I've discovered more and more that to bring Jesus to my world, I must daily recognize my inadequacy and His adequacy. For Central Bible to bring Jesus to our community, we must recognize our inadequacy and His adequacy. Ultimately, we're not

going to do it through dependence on *our* methods, programs, and training. And even though the training we're about to begin on becoming a Contagious Christian is very good and helpful, it's not in dependence upon that that we are going to be effective for Christ. So when we say, "I'll follow you wherever you go," may it be a statement of God-confidence and not self-confidence.

As disciples we must avoid excuses. (Luke 9:59-61)

He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

This seems like a reasonable request. After all, burying a family member was a priority in Jewish culture. Even the burial of dead strangers was considered of extreme importance; how much more so the burial of family members! The Jews understood it to be part of the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother." As such, it took precedence over other religious duties. It also normally took place very soon after death. No waiting around for a week or two as is sometimes the case in our culture.ⁱ So if this man were to go back and first bury his father, he would only take at the most two days and then he would be "in the saddle" with Jesus and the other disciples.

I know that I sure wanted to be involved in the burial of my Dad. He died a sudden death from leukemia in 1999. I was attending a pastor's prayer gathering at the time with a colleague from France. But I left the meetings in order to care for my Dad in his last dying hours. And I'm sure glad I did. So just what *is* Jesus asking of this man and of us?

While I don't believe that caring for my own Dad kept me from following Jesus and even proclaiming the gospel (after all, even his funeral gave me an opportunity to share the gospel), there are some situations in life when we have to decide between personal concerns and Kingdom concerns.

John McNeill, a well-known Scottish preacher of the 19th Century, used to tell how these verses were particularly relevant to him. While he was in the English Midlands, his father died in Scotland. McNeill was scheduled to give an evangelistic campaign on the very day of his father's funeral. People would have completely understood if he had cancelled the engagement. But this is what he wrote in his journal:

"...this same Jesus stood by me, and seemed to say, 'Now, look, I have you. You go and preach the gospel to those people. Would you rather bury the dead or raise the dead?'
And I went to preach."ⁱⁱⁱ

We each have a choice to make between family concerns and kingdom concerns. This is similar to other hard sayings of Jesus, such as where he says that no one can follow him unless he "hates" his mother and father. Certainly Jesus never calls us to "hate" another, and especially not our parents. But our love for God and his kingdom work must take such a priority in our lives that our love for parents could be viewed as "hate."

So here, this man is called to be “on mission” for the Messiah, not to memorialize the past. A similar concern is seen in the next verse:

Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; *but* first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” (Luke 9:61)

How many of us say that? “I will follow you, *but...*” But first, let me finish school; but first, let me get married; but first, let me take care of my debt; but first, let me raise my children; but first, let me plan for my retirement. But first let me...*and you complete the exception.*

But this man’s “but first” was not all that unreasonable. After all, 800 years earlier, when Elijah chose Elisha as his successor, he allowed him to first go back and say good-bye to his family. You can read all about it in 1 Kings 19:19-21. Elijah found Elisha ploughing the field with oxen. Without a word, he simply throws his cloak over Elisha, the customary sign of appointing him as his successor. But Elisha says, “Let me first go and kiss my parents good-bye, and then I’ll come and we’ll get on with the work!” Elijah replies, “Go on back, *what have I done to you?*” ...an expression meaning, “Do as you please.” So Elisha goes back to his family and not only said good-bye but prepared a farewell feast for all the attendants on the family farm! It was only after a five-course meal and late evening entertainment that Elisha got up and followed Elijah.

Maybe this man Jesus is speaking with has this story in mind. And if so, he certainly thinks that Jesus is going to say, “Why sure, go ahead...after all, family ties are very important.” But the response that he gets blows him away! It’s found in verse 62 and with it is the fourth thing we must turn from as disciples of Jesus.

As disciples we must turn from double-mindedness. (Luke 9:62)

Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus plays off this agricultural idea of ploughing? What is Elisha doing when Elijah finds him? He’s ploughing a field. And while Elijah lets him go back and say good-bye to family, the demands and urgency of proclaiming the gospel require a different approach. To be a Jesus follower takes precedence even over family concerns.

A proverbial saying in that culture was: “A ploughman who looks back will not drive a straight furrow.” But Jesus adapts it by saying: “The ploughman who looks back is unfit for the kingdom of God.” In Israel, the terrain is rugged. If a field was to be properly plowed, it demanded focus on what lay ahead. Discipleship is like that. The road can be rough and strewn with challenges and difficulties. There are many intersections where we can decide to turn aside and take a more comfortable route. One of those intersections is family concerns that take priority over kingdom concerns.

In the military, one is required to leave family, home, and country...no questions asked. I called and prayed over the phone with one of our own youth, Peter Khallaf, a week or so ago. He’s leaving for Iraq. Do his parents want him to go? No. Is it a great sacrifice? Yes. But it’s wartime. In the military, no leave is normally given to bury a family member or celebrate a wedding. A

war is on and unusual demands are the norm. Personal agendas are suspended in light of national and international realities.

So it is with the call to follow Jesus. Personal agendas must be suspended in the face of spiritual realities. It is not business-as-usual. What is normal and expected in peace-time must now be laid aside in light of the titanic spiritual battles that God has called us to fight.

Or take the image of a sports training camp. Players devote themselves to the strictest of disciplines in order to get into shape. Diets are imposed and discipline enforced as the athletes prepare themselves for the strenuous competition. The same must be true in the Christian life. Following Jesus is not an extra-curricular event. It is not an elective. It is not an add-on to an already busy life. It is a life and death struggle demanding our whole life. The training camp is the church, and the training camp never ceases. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must stay in shape. God's call upon our lives is not seasonal. It is for a lifetime.

All of this takes great strength: to be willing to endure rejection, to turn from self-confidence, to avoid excuses, and to turn from double-mindedness. Where do we find this strength? We don't find it in ourselves. As we look within ourselves, we only find inadequacy. But in Jesus himself – our model, our savior, we find adequacy. It is only in His strength and grace that you and I can follow Jesus, not as an auditor, but as a disciple. Is that your desire today? Are you willing to endure rejection, turn from your own self-confidence, leave aside your excuses and turn from double-mindedness with the grace that God provides? If God is speaking to you about one or more of these areas of your life, will you do that right now?

ⁱ F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* in *The Jesus Library*, ed. Michael Green (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 162.

ⁱⁱ Cited by F.F. Bruce, 162-163.