**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP**

**Luke 9:51-62**

**INTRODUCTION**

As many of you know, this year is the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. It was in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the churches in the German town of Wittenberg and began his long battle with the Roman Catholic Church to protect, preach, and propagate so many of the doctrines we cherish today, none more precious than the gospel truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

I’m no historian, but I’ve been trying to learn more about the people God used in the Reformation. One of the things that’s helped me is a daily resource e-mailed to me by Desiring God. Each article features one person who either contributed to the lead up to the Reformation or was directly involved in the Reformation.

As I read through these profiles of men and women, I was struck by how many of them gave their lives for the sake of the gospel:

* Jan Hus (1369-1415), a preacher and philosophy professor in modern day Czech Republic, was burned at the stake for believing that Scripture was the ultimate authority, not the Pope.
* Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), a Dominican friar in Florence, Italy, was burned to death as well for speaking against the Pope’s corruption
* William Tyndale (1494-1536), a British teacher and scholar, was executed for translating the Bible into English so that everyone, not just priests, could read it for themselves.
* Hellen Stirke (died 1543) was drowned to death for refusing to pray to the Virgin Mary because she believed that, through Christ, we can pray directly to God.
* Martin Luther (1483-1546) himself was threatened with death, a threat he only escaped because of the intervention of political allies.

Reading these short articles reminded me that following Christ always has a cost. For some who came before us, the cost was their lives. Indeed, even today we have Christian brothers and sisters around the world who are martyred for their faith. Here in the west, Christians may not face mortal danger, but there is still a cost to pay. There always is.

In our text today, Jesus is going to tell us about the cost of following him, and as we will see, what he says doesn’t just apply to 1st century Christians, or Christians who lived during the Reformation, or Christians who live in other countries. What he says applies equally to everyone who would follow him as their Lord and Saviour.

**Read Luke 9:51-62**

The title of this message is **Radical Discipleship.** My aim today is to show you that **Followers of Christ Give Up Everything to Gain the One Who Means Everything.**

Our text today says that followers of Christ are to give up and go without four things. They are to go follow Jesus:

(1) Without Autonomy

(2) Without Home

(3) Without Excuse

(4) Without Regret

**(1) WITHOUT AUTONOMY**

Our text today begins with this sober statement in verse 51: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This marks a turning point in the Gospel of Luke. There are three main sections in Luke’s Gospel that revolve around Jerusalem. Think of them like three Acts in a play: Jesus prepares to go to Jerusalem, Jesus journeys towards Jerusalem, and then Jesus accomplishes his mission in Jerusalem. Luke structures his book around Jerusalem, because that’s where Jesus would fulfill his ministry by dying on the cross. Jesus’ ministry revolves around Jerusalem, because Jesus’ ministry revolves around the cross.

Up to this point in our series, we’ve only been in Act One, as Jesus prepares to go to Jerusalem by reaching the countryside surrounding Jerusalem. The focus of Act One has been on Jesus’ miraculous power. We’ve seen Jesus heal people of their diseases, cast out demons, and even raise dead people to life.

But now, verse 51 signals a transition in Luke’s Gospel: Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Act One is complete, and Act Two is about to start, and Act Two is going to be very different. We’re not going to see many miracles in this Act as Jesus begins his journey towards Jerusalem. Instead, we’re going to get a lot more teaching in the form of instruction and parables. You could say that Act One established Jesus’ credibility through his miraculous works, which confirmed that he was the Messiah. Now in Act Two, with Jesus’ credibility established, we are to listen to what he has to say.

Although there are some key differences between Act One and Act Two, there are some key similarities as well. Jesus still has, and always will have, a heart to reach the lost. We see that in verse 52. Jesus “sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him.”

The Samaritans were despised by the Jewish people, even though they had the same ethnic roots. The Samaritans separated from the Jews after King Solomon died, when Israel split into two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel, and the Kingdom of Judah. As a result of this split, the Samaritans ended up inter-breeding with other nations and adopting a lot of foreign customs, including the worship of idols. They did not recognize the Temple in Jerusalem as the center of worship, and chose to establish their own temple on Mount Gerizim.

Most Jews on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem chose to go around Samaria rather than pass through it. That’s how despised the Samaritans were. But Jesus was different. He may have been on the way to Jerusalem, but that didn’t mean that he ignored people on the way there. Jesus wanted to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God to every village and town, whether they were Jewish, Gentile, or Samaritan.

But Jesus didn’t get the reception he was hoping for. Verse 53 says that “the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” It seems that the animosity flowed both ways between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus’ messengers must have told the Samaritans that Jesus was heading towards Jerusalem, and because of that, the Samaritans wanted nothing to do with him.

This provokes a rather interesting response from two of the apostles in verse 54: “And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’”

Remember that the apostles had just been called out by Jesus for their lack of faith a few verses earlier in verse 41. They had been unable to deliver a demon-possessed boy because their faith was too weak. Now it seems that two of the apostles, the brothers James and John, are trying to make up for it by claiming that they could do something that hadn’t been done since the prophet Elijah: call down fire from heaven to consume God’s enemies.

You have to admit, that’s a pretty impressive offer. Their lack of faith seems to have turned into an overabundance of faith. But rather than commend them, verse 55 says that Jesus rebuked them. Why?

They were rebuked because they believed that they could do something that God had no intention of doing through them. Their hearts may have been in the right place, but their doctrine was not. This wasn’t the time for God’s judgment! This was the time for God’s salvation! The age of Christ is the age of grace, where sinners are called to the throne of grace and not to the throne of judgment. Yes, judgment is coming. Jesus is going to speak about judgment just a little further down in Chapter 10. But judgment isn’t here yet. It’s coming, but not yet.

Jesus has come to save the world, not condemn it. He has come to draw his lost sheep to himself, so that they might trust in him and receive his gift of salvation. Jesus offers us escape from God’s judgment, because on the cross, the judgment of God that was aimed towards us was aimed towards him instead.

Jesus died for the sins of all who trust in him, so that God wouldn’t count our sins against us. He would count us as righteous instead, even though we never did anything righteous. He puts our sin upon Christ, and Christ’s righteousness upon us, so that we could be saved from the wrath of God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

James and John would come to understand this one day, but at this point they didn’t. Their theology wasn’t fully mature yet. At this point, they had bad theology, and bad theology always leads to bad practice.

This is why having good theology is so important. Orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy. Without good theology, we end up doing the wrong things, even though our hearts may be in the right place. James and John had a zeal for the honour and glory of Christ, which I respect and admire, and they knew that God’s judgment would be based on how people respond to Jesus, which was correct. But their understanding of *when* God’s judgment would come was deeply flawed. That’s why Jesus rebuked them, and that’s why Jesus didn’t let them do what they wanted to do.

This shows us that following Jesus requires us to give up our autonomy, and giving up our autonomy means giving in to God’s Word. Autonomy is the claim that we have the right to determine what we do with our lives, not other people, and not God. Most believers know this. We know that we no longer belong to ourselves, but to God. What many believers don’t know is that giving up our autonomy means devoting ourselves to sound theology, because it’s only in figuring out our theology that we figure out how God wants us to live our lives.

We can say that we’re surrendering our lives to God all we want, but if we’re not devoting ourselves to understanding the Scriptures – not just a verse or two, but the entire message of God’s redemption from Genesis to Revelation – then we’re fooling ourselves. Our words of surrender are just that – mere words. If we are to truly give up our autonomy, then we must give in to God’s Word.

**(2) WITHOUT HOME**

As Jesus and his disciples move on to another village, they are met by three anonymous men. We don’t know anything about them, except that they wanted to follow Jesus. In response, Jesus has something different to say to each of them about the cost of following him.

I find this astounding. Jesus has just been rejected by an entire village of people he was trying to reach, and yet he’s still talking about the cost. When we try to share the gospel but are rejected, our temptation is to sugarcoat the message. We try to heap up all the benefits of believing in Jesus while we completely neglect the responsibilities. This can be a temptation for entire churches as well. Churches can begin by preaching about God’s judgment, or the cost of following Jesus, but when they find that their message keeps getting rejected and the church isn’t growing, they start watering down the message and leaving out the hard parts.

We do this because we get desperate. We take rejection so hard, and what our numbers to grow so badly, that we start compromising on the message. But Jesus never compromised, because he never got desperate. He preached the same message again and again, regardless of how people responded. If we would follow Jesus, then we would do well to follow his example.

Now, let’s look at what Jesus says to the first man, which leads to our second point: **followers of Christ live without home.**

The first man approaches Jesus in verse 57 and says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” About ten years ago, I attended Intervarsity Christian Fellowship’s Annual Student Conference known as “Urbana”. It’s a huge conference, with about 20,000 university students in attendance. The keynote speaker that year was megachurch pastor Rick Warren. I don’t remember much of his talk, but I do remember one thing he did. He challenged us to live by the “three W’s”: wherever, whenever, and whatever. We were to go wherever God wanted, whenever God wanted, to do whatever God wanted. I remember feeling very moved as 20,000 students all raised their three fingers up in the shape of a “W” to show our commitment to living like that.

That’s the kind of posture I want when it comes to my life, and it’s the kind of posture we see in the first man. “I will follow you wherever you go.” It’s a powerful statement that implies absolute surrender.

But Jesus isn’t moved by mere sentimentality. He’s a realist, and as a realist, he decides to tell this first person exactly what it will mean to follow Jesus wherever he goes in verse 58: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Jesus is saying, “Do you want to follow me wherever I go? Then don’t just be prepared to leave your home. Be prepared to live as if this world is not your home.” Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Why? Because this world is not his home.

We saw this truth displayed on the Mount of Transfiguration a little earlier in Chapter 9, when Jesus revealed a glimpse of his true, heavenly glory. As Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured, with his clothes dazzling white, and his face shining like the sun, they saw just how far Jesus was from his true home, his heavenly home.

And the amazing thing is that his home is our home. We may not have a home in this lifetime, but we do have a home in the life to come. That’s the home that we are to live for and long for, because that’s where we will finally belong.

We must never forget that we who trust in Christ and follow him live as exiles in this world. We live as foreigners in a foreign land. We have different beliefs, different morals, even a different culture than those around us who do not know Christ. The dividing line between us and them isn’t ethnicity. It’s faith. Faith in Christ changes everything about us: how we live, and what we live for. The apostle Paul actually describes believers as carrying a distinct “smell” (2 Cor. 2:15). We carry the aroma of Christ, a heavenly scent that is foreign to this world, because we are foreign to this world.

The reality, however, is that believers can come to smell just like the rest of the world. Living in the world tends to make us worldly people. We love what the world loves, we laugh at what the world laughs at, and we embrace what the world says is right and wrong. But if we are to truly follow Christ wherever he goes, then we must not go the way of the world.

This should have a profound impact on every area of our lives. It should affect what we turn to for entertainment. It should affect how we use our money and our time. It should affect how we view our work, our families, and our physical homes. It should affect what we talk about, and how we talk to others. It should affect what our hopes are, what our loves are, and where we put our trust.

Followers of Jesus live without a home, because their true home isn’t found in this life. It’s found in the life to come.

(3) **WITHOUT EXCUSE**

We meet the next man in verse 59. Jesus calls him to follow him, but he has some unfinished business to take care of first in verse 59: “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” This leads to our third point: **followers of Christ live without excuse.**

That sounds like a reasonable thing to do, doesn’t it? It seems that the man’s father had just died, and he wants to take care of the funeral before he leaves his home to follow Jesus. It seems that his desire was to honour his father, which was one of the Ten Commandments. So here we have a grieving son who wants to bury his dead father in obedience to God’s command. Surely, Jesus would let him do this first, wouldn’t he?

Jesus’ answer was no. Verse 60: “Jesus said to him, ‘Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’”

I don’t think Jesus is saying that his followers aren’t allowed to have funerals for their parents. That would be too simplistic. It’s clear that Jesus is speaking in rhetorical language, because a literal interpretation would be impossible. The dead can’t do anything, much less bury someone! Jesus is using rhetoric here to make a greater point, and the point he’s making is much more challenging than the simple conclusion that Christians shouldn’t bury their parents.

I think Jesus is making three points here.

The first is that following Jesus results in a radical change in your identity. It’s a change so radical that those who do not follow Jesus are “dead” – that is, spiritually dead in relation to God – and those who do follow him are spiritually alive. In other words, Jesus is such a significant figure that all of humanity can be grouped into two categories, the spiritually dead and the spiritually living, and the category you belong to depends on your response to him. If you follow Jesus, you become spiritually alive, and your primary allegiance shifts away from the spiritually dead and towards Jesus and those who are spiritually alive. This is true even when it comes to your own family members. If you are spiritually alive and they are not, you have a greater allegiance to Jesus and his followers than you do towards your own family members.

Second, becoming spiritually alive results in a fundamental shift in your priorities in life. Followers of Jesus are to prioritize the proclamation of the Kingdom of God over everything else, even something as important and honourable as burying your own father. Your shift in allegiance results in a shift in priorities. Even the highest priorities in this life, such as burying your father, must give way to the greater priority of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Third, and I think most importantly, Jesus is saying that there is absolutely no excuse for delaying discipleship. Darrell Bock puts it this way:

“In essence, a ‘best’ excuse—in fact a reasonable one—has been submitted for postponing discipleship. Nevertheless, Jesus rejects the excuse…Nothing is to block the pursuit of discipleship and nothing is to postpone its start.” (*Luke*, p. 981, ECNT)

Too many people think they have good excuses for postponing discipleship. They tell themselves that they need to finish their education, or get a job, or get married, or own a house, or have kids before they’ll start taking Jesus seriously. But the reality is that, if we are ever going to take Jesus seriously, then the time is always *now*. Whether you are single or married, jobless or near retirement, young or old, the time to follow Jesus is now. Not later. Not after this happens or that happens, it’s now.

Followers of Jesus live without excuse, because nothing can excuse the failure to follow Jesus now.

**(3) WITHOUT REGRET**

This leads us to our last man in verse 61, who says, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus doesn’t refuse the man. He doesn’t say, “If you say farewell to those at your home, you can’t follow me.” Instead, he gives the man a warning: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” This leads to our last point: **followers of Christ live without regret.**

In other words, if you keep looking back at the life you’ve left behind, you won’t be able to follow Jesus forward in the path of discipleship. The work of the Kingdom of God is hard. It takes all your focus, and all your concentration. Jesus compares it to pushing a plow. If you’re pushing a plow forward while looking back, you won’t make straight furrows. You’ll make crooked furrows. And when it comes to farming, crooked furrows are useless.

Whether you’ve been following Christ for years, or you want to follow him for the first time, don’t look back at the life you left behind. Don’t live with regret. Lot’s wife looked back when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and she was destroyed with them. Israel looked back at Egypt after the Exodus, and they were disciplined for it. Don’t look back. Don’t even live with one eye forward and one eye back. The life you’ve left behind isn’t worth comparing to the life that God has now called you to. Keep pressing on, and keep pressing forward, with your gaze fixed on Jesus ahead as you follow him.

**CONCLUSION**

We’ve talked a lot about the cost of following Jesus today. Following Jesus means we give up our autonomy and our sense of belonging to this world. Following Jesus means radically changing our priorities so that nothing stops us from following Jesus, and nothing causes us to look back. After looking so hard at the cost, the key question is, why should we pay it? What makes it worth it?

I can only find one thing in our text today, one thing we gain that makes all the loss worth it. It’s following Jesus. Jesus is the prize for all our sacrifice. Jesus is the gain for all that we give up. We may lose the world, but we gain the One who made the world. We may lose our autonomy, but we gain the One who works all things for the good of those who love him. Followers of Christ may give up everything, but they do it to gain the One who means everything.

There is no greater prize than knowing Jesus. Knowing his mercy, knowing his compassion, knowing his grace, knowing his truth, knowing his love. Jesus is the One who satisfies our souls and makes giving up everything else worth it.