

Leader's Guides



The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer through prayer, penance, repentance of sins, almsgiving, atonement and self-denial. The period of 40 days represents the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted of satan, while emptying himself to prepare for His earthly ministry. As we move through these 40 days, we consider what we might set aside in keeping with the example of Jesus. As we make these discoveries, let us not just give them up for Lent, but give them up for Christ.

Journey to Jerusalem Luke 9:51-63

Week 6. **Giving up expectations**

Bob Dylan asks “How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man”? Tom Cochrane says, “Life is a Highway”. Robert Frost said that “two roads diverged in a wood ...” We seem to relate to the idea of life like a journey, with its ups and downs, peaks and valleys, times when we feel like we are flying through the air and other times when we feel stuck in the muck.

It's the same image that Luke picks up as he continues to tell the story of Jesus. We've been walking alongside Jesus, and thus far all of Jesus' work and teaching and miracles have been in the area of Galilee. But in Luke 9: 51, that all changes as Jesus' journey takes a new direction and He starts down the road to Jerusalem, the center of the nation of Israel, where the political and religious and cultural power is all centralized. Now we have seen thus far that Jesus' journey has continually challenged, upset, reversed, and then recreated all of the existing structures and priorities, but thus far it has been in this little province far from the power center. What might happen when Jesus takes this message into the heart of the nation?

The more immediate question, to which Luke now turns our attention, is to what happens “along the way”. The destination is in view, we'll see Jesus' determination, but there is still a lot of ministry and teaching that will happen “along the way.”

Read Luke 9:51-62.

51 As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. **52** He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. **53** But the people of the village did not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. **54** When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, “Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?” **55** But Jesus turned and rebuked them. **56** So they went on to another village. **57** As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” **58** But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.” **59** He said to another person, “Come, follow me.” The man agreed, but he said, Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.” **60** But Jesus told him, “Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God.” **61** Another said, “Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family.” **62** But Jesus told him, “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”

Destroying the Opposition:

Verse 51 begins the section by showing Jesus in a very determined light - He “resolutely set out for Jerusalem”. Other translations put it this way - “He set his face towards Jerusalem”. He decided, resolved to go, and was determined. He knew where He needed to go next, and when the time was right He went. The rest of Luke are the stories of what happens on the journey, and what happens when Jesus arrives.

There are four quick stories as Jesus begins this journey; the first one continues to demonstrate how Jesus' disciples still haven't quite grasped the nature of the new Kingdom of God. We read the story - Jesus experiences rejection at a Samaritan village, and so James and John default to their expectation of what this Kingdom of God should be - one of power and force that will destroy anything that gets in the way. Remember they expected a military Messiah, so a forceful response is an appropriate recommendation for them. They are making a little progress - they are taking on some authority ("should WE call down fire from heaven?"); but they haven't yet grasped that the new Kingdom of God in Jesus is about the power of love, not the power of "fire and brimstone" from heaven. That part still hasn't sunk in...

Have you ever wanted to call down fire from heaven on someone? In anger, maybe out of hurt or rejection, wished that fire would fall and "burn them up"? I can think of a time or two when I've wanted God to do something drastic to change other people so that my life and expectations can be better - not actually wanted God to destroy, but I have secretly thought about how awesome it would be if something like that happened that just proved how right and justified I was. Can you hear that echoing James and John? I can. They had seen Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, knew the story of Elijah calling down fire from heaven, and thought that the rejection they experienced might merit the same response. But such is not the way of Jesus. When I have done the right thing with those kinds of feelings, prayed them through and sought God's will in them, God ends up showing me that the issue is actually mine. Oh, true the other people might be in the wrong, might be even really dumb and maybe even deserving of some drastic response, but God turns it around, and says, "Let's talk about you. Why is this so important to you? Why is your reaction so strong? Why do you think you know what is best? And, what might happen if you loved instead of prayed for a heavenly judgment and condemnation??" And in the times when I have followed and obeyed and loved instead of dreamt about retribution, the result has been forgiveness; freedom for me, a deepening of relationship, and another advance for the Kingdom of God.

The Cost of Discipleship

What follows is three incidents which help us see what it really means to be a follower of Jesus. There are some hard sayings here, but I think the "bottom line" is that being a follower of Jesus means we must give 100%, with no distractions or excuses or caveats or compromises. Jesus demands our complete and undying loyalty. He wants nothing else to get in the way.

The first incident is with a volunteer. Someone who has obviously been impacted by Jesus, and who wants more, who expresses a willingness and desire to follow Jesus "wherever you go." Surely Jesus should be excited about another follower, warm and welcoming, inviting. Jesus' reply is, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head." It is not a rejection, He doesn't turn this person away, but it is a warning - **following Jesus does not lead to comfort.** It doesn't lead to a life of fluffy pillows, soft beds, shallow entertainment, days of mildly amusing entertainment in a cushy palace. Following Jesus is much more like heading out on a hard but rewarding journey, like joining a mission with huge stakes, massive challenges, sacrifices, but an end goal so worthwhile that whatever the cost, it doesn't matter - we will go, we will keep on the path, we will fight on, push on, overcome, because following Jesus is that worth it".

This is what it means to follow Jesus - not that we'll sit back and be recipients of some meaninglessly pleasurable experience, where God will just richly bless and pamper and lead us to a life of luxury - but rather that we'll be invited into a cause so grand, a mission so critical, where not only do earthly lives hang in the balance, but all of eternity. People we love are lost, alone, wandering around in the dark, their journey is about to take them over a steep cliff where they will be destroyed on the rocks below. They've been blinded, deceived, and are being tempted by things that might taste nice in the moment but are actually poison. And it is like Jesus has a hard hat and some hiking boots, gathers us around the hood of his truck and unfolds a map and looks around and says, "Ok, these are my kids and they are lost in the woods. Who is going to go and find them? Who will seek them out? With that setting, who but the most selfish people around would say," oh, but there are mosquitoes out there... I want to sit in the truck and listen to some music." And how boring would that be! Because when those people get found and restored, every mosquito bite, every scratched leg, every sweat-stained shirt is more than worth it.

Jesus looks at this first volunteer and basically says, "are you sure? It might be hard...", but it is worth it.

The last two incidents are close parallels. The specifics vary slightly, but essentially Jesus calls someone to follow, they accept, but first...

The first man's excuse is, "Lord, first let me return home and bury my father." A pretty good excuse, don't you think? Sounds like a good excuse to me. Some Bible scholars suggest that this man's dad was probably not actually dead yet, because if he was it is unlikely that this conversation with Jesus would even be taking place simply because this man would be consumed with attending to the burial and mourning details and not chatting with a Rabbi. They suggest that maybe the dad was in the process of dying, and thus this man is really trying to put off obeying Jesus for an indefinite time. Maybe a parallel would be, "yes Jesus, I will follow you, but life is just a little too hectic right now. Too much going on, I'm being pulled in too many directions, maybe when life settles down some then I'll be able to follow you...". Jesus has a blunt response: "Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God." Our translation adds the word "spiritually", just to underscore that Jesus is speaking metaphorically. Obviously, actual dead people can't physically bury other dead people. It is a harsh response. A difficult thing to hear. Is Jesus saying that following Him is more important than our family obligations? Even when those obligations revolve around the death of a loved one? Yes, He is. But He is not just discounting one important responsibility; he is elevating another responsibility. "Your duty is to go and announce the Kingdom of God". As hard as it is to hear, Jesus is clearly saying that our duty to the Kingdom of God is more important than family.

Likewise in the second story. Here a third person agrees to follow, and offers up a different "but first"... This guy wants to return to say goodbye. Again, seems reasonable, and again Jesus response is difficult to hear. "Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God." And again, Jesus clearly says that our duty to the Kingdom of God is more important than family.

Then what is This Kingdom of God That Must Take Precedence?

So in the face of this difficult command, the question that seems most important to me is "if the Kingdom of God is more important than family, I better know what this Kingdom of God actually is." Its simplest, it can be understood as the reign of the King. The Kingdom of God is wherever God is the King. Where God is first, obeyed, worshipped, and loved. Wherever there is power to live life to the fullest. This is the Kingdom of God. Wherever love is first, wherever justice is pursued without prejudice, wherever people are becoming whole and restored and forgiven in relationship. This is the Kingdom of God.

Now comes what I think is most crucial in understanding these verses and these hard sayings: Jesus said, "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." (Matt 6:33) It's the same backwards idea as Jesus said in Luke 9:24 - "If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." I want to try to make this as clear as possible: when we put the Kingdom of God first, we do not abandon our families, we don't leave them behind to take off to some remote place as a missionary without so much as a "goodbye wife and kids!" or a "make sure you dead people get papa in the grave, I'm out of here!" No, when we put the Kingdom of God first, God gives us everything we need to live out the reign of God in our families, in our place, in our context. When we give up our lives for Jesus' sake, we find our lives. We can be fully, powerfully, joyfully in the middle of the place God has put us in, without looking back, procrastinating, offering a feeble "well Jesus I want to follow You, but first I need to..." When we abandon ourselves to Jesus, giving Him our whole life, Jesus takes it, heals it (over time), and hands it back to us who are now changed people able to engage, embrace, love freely and passionately, and live life to the full.

Notice that in all three stories, we don't hear the ending. We don't know what the response was. I believe Luke did that absolutely on purpose, so that we the readers would have to wonder, and would ask the personalized question - what am I going to do with this challenge of Jesus to follow Him first, to follow Him completely, and to really make Him number one in my life? That is the question I leave with you today. We've read hard sayings of Jesus, heard that the call to be Jesus' follower is complete and all-encompassing, that the journey might really be rough, but that it is only rough because the cause is so absolutely critical. Jesus' call is to **complete discipleship. Total love. Abandoning ourselves to Him. No half heartedness, no "yes, but first..."**, no giving Jesus just a piece of us. **He wants it all, because it is all broken and it all needs to be healed, and then He gives it back.** Maybe that is why Jesus sounds so harsh here, because Jesus knows just how broken and messy all the stuff that we try to control really is, and He wants us to give it to Him so He can do something about it.

So I leave you with this: will you give Jesus all?