

Christ's Solutions to Failed Resolutions

⁵⁷ Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, *that* someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay *His* head." ⁵⁹ Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go *and* bid them farewell who are at my house." ⁶² But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (Lk. 9:57-62)

January ^{2nd} is a monument to failed commitments. People are fond of using the New Year as a time to make resolutions, decisions, commitments for the new year ahead. And that's appropriate. A new year is like a new day, fresh morning. It is a chance to begin again, to tackle what has been abandoned, to pick up what was dropped, to try again at what we did not succeed in.

However, in some people, the only new year's resolution they end up keeping is the resolution to make another set of resolutions next year. All the plans, commitments and goals they made on January 1st are a distant memory on December 31st.

As Christians, we ought to set ourselves spiritual goals. We ought to make it our goal to read right through the Bible. We ought to make it a goal to meet with God in private worship each day, to be weekly with God's people in church, to be evangelising and discipling someone, to be reading and growing in our faith. We should make it our goal to do more for God this year in our church, to encourage more people, to memorise more Scripture, to waste less time, to read more edifying books, to volunteer for more service.

And as Christians, we can know that if our goals are for the glory of God, and if we give ourselves to them, we can expect God's empowerment, God's grace to assist us.

Why then do our commitments and promises so often end up like footprints on the beach, washed up and invisible with the incoming tide of the passing of time? Why do we mean so well, but oftentimes do so little?

Jesus once dealt with three people who had great spiritual intentions, great spiritual ambitions, but no commitment, no follow-through, no fulfilment. Perhaps they were all there at one time, or perhaps Luke merged Jesus' responses on three separate occasions into one paragraph to give us a strong sense of how Jesus responded to good intentions that veiled uncommitted and unprepared hearts.

We are the kind of creatures who can deceive ourselves. We can take our intentions, our ambitions, our hopes, and see them as the same as actually obeying and fulfilling that commitment. We live in a culture that says that if you mean well, that's all that matters. If you are sincere, then it doesn't matter what you do. If you feel authentic about yourself, then no one should judge you and you shouldn't feel guilty, even if you fail. With this, we can keep making resolutions, keep failing, and yet keep consoling ourselves that we are making resolutions every year.

But Jesus is the Light, and the Light exposes darkness. Jesus points the light of truth on this kind of self-deceiving darkness. He does that because He loves us and wants us to see why our good intentions may be nothing more than that. He wants us to see why our resolutions can end up just being an idea or a wish, but not a decision.

Here we will see Jesus' solutions to failed resolutions. In Luke 9, we will meet three men that had

made resolutions to follow Jesus. But as we'll see, each of them has something which will destroy that resolution, unless it is dealt with.

And as we examine the response of Jesus to these men, at first glance, Jesus seems hard, forceful, even pushy. He seems to be making unreasonable and hard demands in these men.

But as we examine the passage we understand the wisdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Great Shepherd of our souls knows our natures all too well. He knows what becomes of a new year's resolution to follow Him if the flesh is given any room. The Designer of our souls knows that if our own way is indulged even a bit, it soon spreads like weeds and thorns to choke out all other desires. The Lord Jesus is radical and urgent in His demand that a desire for God make no compromises with the flesh. If we are to make progress for Christ this year, if we are to truly follow Him, we must allow these words of Jesus to reveal our own flesh to us, so that we may respond in the right way.

I. Embrace the Difficulty of Commitment to Christ

⁵⁷ Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, *that* someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay *His* head."

The first man we read of comes to Jesus with a statement that all of us would surely applaud. "Jesus, I will follow you anywhere you go." Now, what could be wrong with that? Here is a man who even added the words "wherever you go". This man seems to be making a total surrender of his life. According to the account in Matthew, he was actually one of the scribes. But instead of shaking his hand and welcoming him aboard, we find Jesus responding with words of warning: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Jesus says, "Let me tell you what that means. The animals have more stability than my ministry does. Birds have nests, foxes have their own holes, I do not have a permanent place to lay my head. Following me means a lack of convenience, a lack of comfort, and a lack of finances too."

Apparently, Jesus knew what this scribe was after. He was after the life he enjoyed as a professional religious scribe, just with Jesus added. Jesus knew this man would drop out if Jesus didn't confront the man's flesh with the hard reality of following Him. Jesus does not want us to be in love with the idea of following Him, He wants us to follow Him. Our flesh will deceive us into thinking that good intentions are good enough. But Jesus rejects that. He wants our commitments to materialise.

Now, please note, Jesus is not saying to the man, go away, the cost is too high. He called men to Himself and said, 'follow me'. But He wants us to know that saying "I will follow Jesus more this year" will mean, "I will embrace more sacrifice than I did last year."

He wants us to embrace the cost, not shrink back from it. But He will not give our flesh any illusions. If we are to progress, there will be some pain, some inconvenience, some discomfort, some sacrifice. The blessings of the Christian life far outweigh the sacrifices. But because the blessings are so incredible, often the sacrifices are large as well.

In other words, Jesus says to this man, and He says to all of our resolutions: 'Understand and embrace the cost of your resolution.' You resolve to have more fellowship with Christ. Consider the cost: less time for trivial entertainment, maybe an hour less of a hobby or some leisure time. You want to be more useful to Christ in the local church: consider and embrace the cost, driving out to church when it's easier to plop behind the TV, driving out when you are already tired and the day has been long. You want to disciple: embrace the cost: meeting someone regularly for Bible study –

either early before rush hour, or at night, when you're exhausted from the day's work, or on a Saturday, when you'd like to just be with your family or go on an outing, or do house projects. You want to put off certain sins, consider the cost: the pain of withdrawal, the discipline that sometimes hurts, the difficulty of learning new habits. Yes, there is a cost.

You see, many a Christian says, "I will follow Jesus", but like this man, the full sentence in their hearts would really read: "I will follow if it doesn't cost too much in time or money or pain. I'm already tired and stretched and pushed to the max, so I will follow Jesus if it doesn't add any more burdens to my life"

Jesus' Reply: It will never be cheap and easy to follow Me. Following me means re-ordering your life around Me, not trying to see if I can fit into what you already have going. Jesus deliberately warns this man that following Him will provide less stability than he enjoys right now. If you are waiting for stability and predictability and convenience before you follow through, then your resolutions will always be simply wishes: nice, well-intentioned hopes and feelings: posters on your wall, memes on your desktop, sayings on your WhatsApp profile that console you, but never commit you.

II. Embrace the Urgency of Commitment to Christ

⁵⁹ Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." ⁶¹

The second man we meet has the honour of being called by Jesus. Jesus says, "Follow me". And this man says, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Now, in Jewish culture, a burial took place within 24 hours of someone's death. So it's unlikely that this man's father had just died and the man happened to be hanging around Jesus' disciples. His words more likely mean that his father was getting older and nearing death. The meaning is "Lord, let me take care of my dying father's affairs. When my father dies, I'll take care of matters, get the inheritance, and I will come and follow you."

Well, once again, we ask, what could be wrong with tying up family matters? Surely, we would expect Jesus to reply by saying, "That's fine. I will see you when you've taken care of all that." But instead He says, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."

Now we know that corpses cannot bury other corpses. What Jesus no doubt means here is, let the unbelievers – the spiritually dead-- bury their dead. He is saying to the man, if you claim to be My follower, then you are spiritually alive, and therefore belong to the kingdom of God. Your priority is the preaching of the kingdom of God. You have relatives who can and will take care of that. Instead of delaying and procrastinating and waiting for the supposedly ideal moment, commit to Me right now.

Jesus is confronting the second great destroyer of resolutions: procrastination and delay. This man thought that commitment to Christ was the sort of thing you can postpone and then pick up whenever it suited him. As if membership in Christ is like membership at a country club or a library: it's always there, and when it suits you, you go back and spend time there.

But Jesus insists that the man get on to his commitment now. He insists upon an immediate deposit of obedience. The man must start preaching the kingdom of God now, not tomorrow, not in a month or a year or some other time.

The reason is this: Jesus knows that sinful human nature does not respond to resolutions unless they are enforced immediately, urgently and quite inconveniently. When laziness is given a hand, it takes an arm. And so you have people saying, "I will stop drinking this year – but only after this drink". This year, I plan to keep my room neat and tidy, but I will start cleaning it tomorrow. I will start reading my Bible, after the holidays. I'm going to get involved, once church goes back to normal.

And of course, with that kind of self-deceitful resolution, nothing happens. With that procrastination, tomorrow becomes tomorrow, until we are back at December 31st with no change.

This is why some Christians watch the years pass them by without growth, because they expect time to stand still and life to slow down to a crawl before they follow through. I'll serve God more, I'll get baptised and become a member, I'll study the Bible, I'll give, I'll train for ministry when I have more money, when my job allows me to, when I am in another country, when I have a steady job, when I am married, when my children are older, when my children are out the house, when my children are married, when my grandchildren are older, when I am feeling better than I am now. I will follow through on my commitments to be more devoted to the Lord to His Word, to His church, to prayer, when I have sorted out everything that I feel I want to sort out, and it appears to fit in to the life I have. And no surprise, those things never arrive. Just like you always found other interesting things to do the night you were supposed to be studying for exams, so your flesh will always find things going on in your life that don't allow you to get serious with God.

Jesus said to the man: the thing you claim to be worrying about will actually take care of itself, and in the mean time, start preaching the kingdom of God. That thing you say must still happen, it may or may not happen in your life, but while the hours and days of your life are ticking away, begin now on your resolution.

Jesus would not allow any delayed obedience. Delayed obedience is disobedience. He knew the leaning of the sinful nature, and He knew that when we go to kiss our sins goodbye, we end up staying. He knew that when we postpone obedience for a time in the future, it always remains in the future. His demands were for immediate present-tense obedience that would follow Him no matter what the cost. He would not accept second best.

His call to us regarding our commitments is: not tomorrow. Not Lord, I will, but... He gives our sinful flesh no room to move, to escape, to manoeuvre at all. And that is as it should be.

III. Embrace the Priority of Commitment to Christ

And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go *and* bid them farewell who are at my house."

⁶² But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Our third man again approaches Jesus with the desire to follow Him, just with one request to be able to say goodbye to family. Now, once again, surely a reasonable request. Lord, I am with you, I will follow you, just let me go and say goodbye. I am so committed to you, I realise that I might not see them again soon, so I just want to say my farewells." Now who could object to that? What is wrong with just saying goodbye? But instead, Jesus responds with, "But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

If a man is ploughing a field, and he looks behind him while he does so, he will end up with a very crooked furrow. His eyes need to be ahead, and on what he is doing. Jesus says that committing to Him is like that. You have to forget what is behind, and press toward the mark.

Something is happening here that goes beyond waving goodbye at the door. Very likely, this man's family had not chosen to follow Jesus. They were not following Jesus, nor did they have any interest in Him. Here was a man who must leave these people who are rejecting Jesus, but his heart is still very much with them. He is a double-minded, limping between two opinions. And Jesus confronts this mentality with a stern warning, those looking back are not fit for God's kingdom.

To say a fond farewell to what you are leaving behind suggests your heart remains with what you are saying goodbye to. It means you are torn, and would linger at the place of tearing. This man's family are pictures of the old life, the life in the world, the life lived by its standards, for its pleasures.

Jesus knows human nature. When you are making a new resolution to follow Christ in some way, you have to cut off whatever would destroy and weaken that resolution. If you try to mingle the two, what will suffer is your commitment to Christ. Jesus has to confront the man with the truth. Your commitment is not solid, your devotion is shaky and unstable. You have not yet made Me the priority, and no man can serve two masters.

Here is why many resolutions do not last. It is because other commitments are allowed to co-exist with them. They are like the thorns that choke out the good seed. Christ and coveting money. The church and the world. The Bible and filthy TV. Christians and old drinking buddies. Christian books and pornography. Serving others and being a TV-junkie. Loving one another and Facebook gossip. Corporate worship and my all-weekend hobby or sport.

You cannot plough forward and look backward. You cannot pursue holiness and long for sin. You cannot seek to preach the Gospel but actually miss being a sinner.

Worldliness is always a matter of who is our first love. That's why James calls worldliness adultery.

⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (Jas. 4:4)

God expects to be our first love. When we keep looking back, we are committing spiritual adultery, longing for another spouse besides Christ. For good reason we say these words in our marriage vows: we ask, will you, “forsaking all others keep thee only unto her/him as long as you both shall live?”

Sometimes the reason why some commitments don't last is because of all the other commitments we are feeding: commitments to movies, and social media, and games and shopping, and fitness and diet, and computer games and gadgets and clothes and cars and collections. These things are only safe when they are subordinated to the great commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. Even good things become bad things when they rob us of the one best thing: love for God.

Jesus often calls for radical prioritisation of Him, so that we don't deceive ourselves, and fit Jesus snugly in to the rest of our life. “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Mat 10:37)

Always Jesus presses our souls to confess He is the priority. Always He insists that we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will be added to us.

Spiritual resolutions die when they take second place to something else. They are first, or nothing. Christ is the priority, or He will fade to the back of queue of our to-do list.

Jesus allows for no excuses because He knows our flesh better than anyone else. His rigidness is rooted in love. He would have us find our deepest joys in Him, but He knows these joys are impossible for one that is double-minded, half-hearted, idolatrous or lazy. So He confronts us with the cost of following Him, with the priority of following Him, with the urgency of following Him.

Difficulty, priority and urgency all confront and rub our sinful natures up the wrong way. Jesus applies medicine designed to cause reactions. Our flesh is lazy and committed to its own comfort and convenience. Our flesh is self-centred and committed to loving who and what it wants. Our flesh loves its own ways and gifts and does not trust that wholehearted commitment to Jesus will satisfy. And so Jesus rubs our fleshly fur deliberately so as to make it stick up and get uncomfortable. He will not stroke our flesh one bit.

He says Count the cost, no delay, prioritise.

But the reason for this is simple: Jesus loves us. He does not call for commitment because He needs

labourers. He calls for this because He seeks worshippers. He seeks people that will enjoy Him, and adore Him, and find their deepest satisfaction in Him. But He knows that such experiences are impossible when our flesh remains unchallenged and in control. He knows we will remain where we are spiritually unless we confront our deceitful hearts with the truth – following Jesus will have a cost, it means I must obey Him now, it will mean I must prioritise Him. So He calls us to put our flesh to death so as to really live. To say ‘no’ to things that displease God, so that we can enjoy the pleasure of pleasing God.

That is why he said, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. (Luk 9:24)

In other words, you want life, don’t you? You want real joy, don’t you? Then lose your life for me. Put your flesh to death, embrace the sacrifice, the cost, the inconvenience of following me. Die to your desire to put yourself and even your family ahead of me, and put me first. Die to procrastination and putting off following me and die to your own schedule and desire to control your time, and follow me now, always now. If you do that – you will find life. You will find far greater blessings than the things you thought you were gaining by sitting at home, or trying what is easier or more convenient or more comfortable. You will enjoy a family life far more intimate, far richer and far more beautiful than if you try to control it and leave Christ outside the door. You will enjoy a life of satisfaction in Him far greater than if you had gone back to say one more goodbye to your sins.

Jesus does not call us to less joy, but to more. He does not call us to less satisfaction but to more. His call though is to save your life by losing it. To give up to gain. To sacrifice to obtain. His call is indeed a call to commitment – but it is a commitment to find the greatest treasure of all – the love of God.

Every believer I would ask the question, “Do you want to follow Jesus more this year” to, would reply, “Yes” But the question is – are we willing to do that at a cost? Are we willing to do that without delay? Are we willing to do that in a way in which we enthrone Him as the chief love of our lives? If we embrace difficulty, urgency and priority of our resolutions, then by His grace and enablement, we will continue in His Word for this coming year.