

My Future Commitment

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever you go." 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." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:57-62

The first of January is a monument to failed commitments. People are fond of using the New Year as a time to make resolutions, decisions, and commitments for the 'new year' ahead. But by December 31st, those resolutions are often nothing more than a memory.

The reason is simple – sinful human nature does not respond to resolutions unless they are enforced immediately, urgently and quite inconveniently. When the flesh is given a hand, it takes an arm. So you have people saying, "I will stop drinking this year – but only after this drink." And of course, with that kind of self-deceitful resolution, nothing happens.

Or, "this year, I plan to keep my room neat and tidy – but I will start cleaning it tomorrow." With that procrastination, tomorrow becomes tomorrow until we are back at December 31st with no change. The fact is – the sinful nature loves comfort, procrastination and delay. Keep giving the flesh more room, and it will just keep going its own way.

It's this same principle that explains why the intentions of many Christians never materialise into actions. How many Christians make commitments, decisions, re-dedications of their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, but then never follow through. There are good intentions, but weak results. The reason is exactly the same.

You can say with your lips, "This year I plan to read my Bible every day, pray every day; this year I plan to be faithful to the different services of the church; this year I plan to increasingly put off the old sinful ways, and put on the new; this year I plan to be diligent in sharing my faith with my friends, colleagues, relatives" – but if you give your flesh any room to go its own way, your desires for greater devotion to Jesus will remain just that: desires. We will arrive at January 1st, and there will still be the same desires, and yet the same lack of change.

If we are to change, we must examine the example of our Lord Jesus Christ in dealing with three would-be followers of Him. Here are three men that could have followed Jesus. But all three have a reason, an excuse that delays or takes away from their desire to follow Jesus. And as we examine the response of Jesus to these men, it is quite bewildering.

At first glance, Jesus seems hard, forceful, and even pushy. He seems to be making unreasonable claims on these men. He seems to be pushing aside quite reasonable things – family ties, family greetings – in what appears to be a demanding insistence that they follow Him without delay.

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.

The Holy Spirit chose to include in the Bible three men with three different angles on following Jesus. They reveal much about what is in our own hearts. What is frightening about these three men is that their requests and remarks seem quite reasonable, quite normal. To have them dismissed by Jesus underlines the radical nature of commitment to Jesus. It requires all of us, if we are to enter in to the blessedness of experiencing God.

Consider the cost

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? Well, a hearty Amen is what we would expect, right? "Welcome aboard. That you would put no conditions on following Me is wonderful." No, instead 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"* (Luke 9:57).

Here is a man, apparently a scribe, we learn from the account in Matthew, who spontaneously declared his desire to follow Jesus – anywhere. In reply, 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 possibly sleeping outside, it means a lack of convenience, a lack of comfort, and a lack of finances too.'

In other words, Jesus says to this man, and He says to all of our resolutions: 'Count the cost. Consider the cost.' You want more fellowship with Christ – a wonderful thing. Consider the cost – less time for trivial entertainment, more time on your knees. You want to be more blessedly used for God? Consider the cost in driving out to church when it's easier to plop behind the TV. You want to put off certain sins? Consider the cost – the pain of withdrawal, the discipline that sometimes hurts you, the difficulty of learning new habits. Yes, there is a cost.

Now, please note, Jesus does not mean – '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.

You see, many a Christian says, 'I will follow Jesus,' but like this man, they are not stating what is truly in their hearts: 'I will follow at my convenience (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 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.'

Jesus' reply: 'It will never be convenient to follow Me.'

Everything has its place, but it must never usurp God's place. Work, finances, health, family, rest, leisure time, all have their appointed place in life. They are God's gifts. But they are not meant to bump our devotion to God. If you want your walk with God to settle into a nice, perfectly ordered, perfectly comfortable and convenient pace, you will always miss it.

Jesus deliberately warns this man that following Him will provide less stability than he enjoys right now. Even the animals would be more certain of where to lay their heads. The desire for stability, security or certainty is not in itself a bad thing. But to want them before committing to Jesus, or to demand them as part of the bargain, or to adopt a wait-and-see approach, is not committing to God in a way He expects. God says, 'Follow me at all costs.'

Jesus knew this man would drop out if he didn't confront his 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. Make a commitment, consider the cost of that commitment, and then embrace the cost.

Family in its place

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*" (**Luke 9:59**). Now in Jewish culture, a burial usually took place within 24 hours of someone's death. So it's unlikely that this man's father had just died. It more likely means that his father was getting older and near death. The meaning is, 'Lord, let me take care of my dying father's affairs. Let me just take care of this, and I will come and follow you.'

Well, once again, we ask, what could be wrong with a request to help a dying man? Surely Jesus would reply by saying, "That's fine. I will see you when it's over." 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, 'Your unsaved, and therefore spiritually dead, relatives can bury their dead. Your priority is the preaching of the kingdom of God.'

Now we know that Jesus was not against going to funerals. He came alongside a funeral procession in the city of Nain. He went to Lazarus' tomb. But he was touching something in this individual's life that was choking his commitment to Jesus, and it was this: Family.

Now this might seem almost contradictory, but there is a balance. God is for the family. God's heart is for Spirit-filled, Christ-honouring, biblical families. We have taught and will continue to teach on marriage and child-training from a biblical perspective. The family comes first.

But the good thing called family can become an idol. Apparently for this man, his love for family was dangerously close to, if not already competing with, his love for Christ. And so Jesus challenges him to prioritise love for God over love for family.

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he that loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."

Matthew 10:37

"If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his father, and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

Luke 14:26

The clue that the meaning of the word 'hate' here is somewhat different lies in the fact that Jesus says, "*his own life also.*" Now the Bible tells us no one ever hated himself. The second command rests on the assumption that we love ourselves. Therefore 'hate' here must mean 'to choose someone else in favour of – to love someone else more, such that they receive first priority.' I must reject my own

life – my own wishes, in favour of someone else's. Who is that someone? Christ. And so love for family must be subordinated to a love for God.

This man was saying, "The needs of my family are pressing upon me, and must take priority over my commitment to you, Lord Jesus." And that is what many believers today say: 'Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let my children get older. Yes, I will be more committed, but I am waiting for everything to come right in my marriage, or between me and my children. When I have sorted that out, then I will come to church, or serve, or teach, or give, or show mercy or encourage others.'

Am I saying, 'Abandon family responsibility?' No, you will never hear me saying that. But I do believe Jesus is saying, 'Put Me first, and I will take care of your family. Prioritise Me in your life, and the dead will bury the dead.'

It is sad when families believe they need 'family time' that takes them away from fellowship with other believers, away from devotion to God, away from consecration. If 'family time' is taking you away from Christ, then you will meet this verse head-on.

God loves the family. When Jesus hung on the cross, He called out to the apostle, John, "*Behold your mother,*" indicating Mary (**John 19:27**). Even to his last day, Jesus was taking care of His mother, and loving the family. But at the same time, He never allowed family to compete with love for God:

And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You." But He answered them, saying, "Who is My mother, or My brothers?" And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother."

Mark 3:32-35

God will not compete with one of His gifts. He demands that family be surrendered to Him. That's the only time it is safe. When we try to hold onto family relationships at the expense of what we know God expects from us, the very thing we are trying to preserve will begin to unravel.

Family is a ministry, not a master. Family is a place to serve God and one another. It is not supposed to control us and chain us and limit our freedom to follow the Lord. It is supposed to facilitate it.

Commitment to a good thing becomes a bad thing when it robs you of the best thing. Just like our flesh makes us think a desire to follow is as good as following, so our flesh deceives us into thinking love for my family is automatically love for God. And Jesus once again does not give our flesh an inch.

One last taste

Our third man again approaches Jesus with the desire to follow Him. He says, "*Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house*" (**Luke 9:61**). Now, once again, surely this is 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, "*No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God*" (**Luke 9:62**). By that He means, 'If you are going back, you are not fit, you are not ready, to follow me. Your commitment is not solid; your devotion is shaky and unstable.'

Probably the idea must be that this man's family had not chosen to follow Jesus. They are pictures of the old life. They are not following Jesus, nor do they have any interest in Him. 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.

Here is a man who must leave these people who are rejecting Jesus, but his heart is still very much with them. He is 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.

This man's attitude is found in many a person. 'Yes, Lord, I will follow, but just one more experience of this. I will get serious with you, but just let me have one more taste of the old life. A last drink, a last filthy movie, a last get-together with blaspheming, profane friends, a last listen to this God-displeasing music, and then I'm with you, Lord. Let me have one more foray into immoral sex, one more look at pornography, one more angry blow-up at my colleagues or relatives, and then I'm done.'

Or maybe even, 'Let me have just one more hour to sleep in, Lord, and then I'll get up and go to church. Just today, Lord, that I don't read my Bible and pray, but I'll start tomorrow. Just let me have one last session of this sin, or this lack of doing what I am supposed to do, and then I am all with you, Lord.'

But the truth is – one last something usually becomes just one more of many. Jesus would not allow any delayed obedience, because delayed obedience is disobedience. He knew the leaning of the sinful nature, and He knew that when we run back 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.

Jesus' demands were for immediate present-tense obedience that would follow Him no matter what the cost. He would not accept second best. And 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.

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. You must put the flesh to death by denying it now – today and not tomorrow. You must grow in holiness by obeying now, today and not sometime in the future.

Jesus allows for no excuses because He knows our flesh better than anyone else. His rigidity is rooted in love. He would have us find our deepest joys in Him, but He knows these joys are impossible for one who 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 against our sinful natures. Jesus applies medicine that is 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. So He rubs against our flesh deliberately, to make it stick up and feel uncomfortable. He will not stroke our flesh one bit. He says, "Count the cost, prioritise, don't delay, don't turn back."

The reason for this is simple: Jesus loves us. He does not call for commitment because He needs labourers. He calls for it because He seeks worshippers. He seeks people Who 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.

Jesus knows we will remain where we are, spiritually, unless we confront our deceitful hearts with the truth – following Jesus will have a cost, it will mean I must prioritise Him even over family, and it means I must obey Him now. So He calls us to put our flesh to death so as to really live. To say ‘no’ to things which 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.”

Luke 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, and 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 in following Me, 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.

To every believer I would ask the question, “Do you want to follow Jesus more this year?” To those who would reply, “Yes,” the question is – “Are we willing to do that now and without delay? Are we willing to do that in a way in which we enthrone Him as the chief love of our lives? Are we willing to do it without one last foray into sin?”

The reasonable excuses are the most dangerous ones. They are the ones we are most likely to believe and stick by. Love for God must become intolerant of anything that would postpone or weaken obedience to Jesus Christ.