

SESSION 5

LET THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD



*When have you found yourself
jumping on a bandwagon?*

QUESTION #1

Following Jesus takes priority over all other commitments.

THE PASSAGE

Luke 9:57-62

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Following a sports team can be a fun endeavor, but fans come in two breeds:

1. Fair weather fans follow a team only when it's winning. They like to cheer, and following the best team available gives validity to their cheering.
2. Faithful fans hang in there through thick and thin, the wins and the losses. They develop a strong foundation to stand on as they support their team in both the ups and the downs.

In my elementary and junior high days, I was a diehard Cubs fan. The only time I'd be inside during the summer was when the Cubs were on TV. However, in high school my allegiance changed to the Astros. It's interesting how the seasons of life can affect what we hold as important, even which sports team we follow.

Unfortunately, the same can be true about the priority we place on following Jesus. It's easy to follow Jesus when everything is going great, but what happens when it becomes uncomfortable or other things call for our attention? In Luke 9, Jesus challenged us to consider the cost of following Him.

Luke 9:57-58

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “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.”

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus called people to follow Him. The Greek word *akoloutheo* [*ak-ol-oo-THEH-o*] was used seventy-seven times in the Gospels to refer to following Jesus. This word means “one going in the same way.” The call from the Lord to follow Him was always in the present imperative, which means it was an ongoing command. Following Jesus, then, is not a momentary decision or just for a set period. When Jesus calls for someone to follow Him, He literally means “keep on following Me.” Jesus’ call for us to follow Him is simple: *From now on—for your entire life—follow Me.*

Luke gave us three instances of “would-be” disciples that show us just how radical the call is to follow Jesus. The first of these three would-be disciples made a strong statement, “I will follow you wherever you go.” This man had likely seen many miracles and heard Jesus teach, and he decided this was a man he could get behind. He may have determined Jesus was the political messiah the Jews hoped for, and he wanted to jump on His bandwagon.

Matthew identified this man as “a scribe” (Matt. 8:19). Scribes were experts in religious law; we would call them lawyers today. They were highly esteemed in Jewish society. In the Gospels, we typically see the scribes siding with the Pharisees rather than with Jesus. However, this upper-middle class individual made an impressive declaration of changing his allegiance to Jesus. What a great testimony this might have turned out to be. Local headlines would have read, “Scribe Becomes Christ Follower!”

We might even praise this man for his eagerness to follow. He had declared that he was willing to follow Jesus “wherever you go.” But Jesus, in His infinite wisdom, knew what was in the man’s heart (John 2:25); Jesus knew this was not a whole-hearted declaration to follow Him, so Jesus addressed this scribe’s statement by introducing the full cost of following.

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Wild animals like foxes and birds had a more comfortable life ahead of them than Jesus did. Jesus knew the full sacrifice involved in what lay ahead of Him. Because following meant “one going in the same way.” Jesus knew all it would take for someone to follow Him. Jesus knew that this scribe was not ready to let go of personal comforts.

To be fair, the scribe was willing to let go of a great deal in order to be associated with Jesus. He was willing to make a public stance of following Jesus, which could hinder his status as a scribe. But Jesus saw past the surface into his heart, knowing that this man’s desire was not of a sacrificial nature, but of a self-serving nature and for personal comfort. If Jesus was headed to even greater things among the Jewish people, as this man likely imagined, a life of comfort awaited those aligned with Him.

DIGGING DEEPER



ANIMAL IMAGERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Throughout recorded history, people have used imagery from the animal kingdom to convey thoughts, teach lessons, give warnings, or provide examples of right and wrong in life. Animals were important to the story as early as Genesis and Homer; in Aesop’s fables, they were essential.

In Luke 9:58, Jesus spoke of a fox and a bird to show how difficult and potentially how desolate life may be for His true followers. A bird and fox each have a place, a home, in their natural habitat. Not so Jesus. He was laying down the challenge for the “wannabes” who had not counted the cost: can you face such a life?

C. Mark Roark, “Animal Imagery in the New Testament,” *Biblical Illustrator*, Spring 2013, pp. 47-51.

Earlier, in Luke 9, Jesus spoke of the cost of following Him: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). When Jesus invites us to follow Him, He is calling us to deny ourselves of our own desires and comforts and step into this new life of following Him.

Jesus was willing to live without the creature comforts of the creatures he created! It seems this scribe was not willing to accept a lack of personal comfort. Jesus never told the man he could not follow; He simply outlined the cost and allowed the scribe to decide.

We must be willing to accept the gift of God that cost us nothing (Eph. 2:8-9), but at the same time, cost us everything as we deny ourselves to follow Him. Are you willing and ready to follow Jesus, even if the cost includes no guarantee of comfort?

What are some comforts we may be called to give up in order to follow Jesus?

QUESTION #2

Luke 9:59-60

59 To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

60 And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The first would-be disciple had come to Jesus on his own seeking to be a follower. With the second would-be disciple, Jesus Himself took the initiative of calling him to follow. What an honor it is to have Jesus Himself say to you, “Follow me.” Whether this man felt honored or not, we are uncertain, but he did give a response.

“But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’” Sounds like a reasonable request. In fact, for Jews, burying the dead was a religious duty that took precedence over everything else.

On the surface, it appears this man was asking to do an honorable task. That’s why Jesus’ answer seems particularly harsh. “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Whoa. Wait! *What did He just say?*

As honorable as the man’s request sounds to our contemporary ears, we miss one critical detail: the man’s father wasn’t dead yet! If his father had already died, he would have been buried immediately. The man also would’ve been in a month-long period of mourning—and not conversing with Jesus.

People in parts of the Middle East still use the saying, “I must bury my father” Today it means a man will remain home until his father dies to help with the family business and responsibilities, and receive his inheritance after his father’s death. Perhaps the would-be disciple’s excuse carried a concern that leaving and following Jesus in that moment could mean the loss of his inheritance.

What if this man’s father was very ill and near death? The physical condition of the man’s father had little to do with this conversation, but the condition of the man’s heart had everything to do with it. Family responsibilities and religious duty did not hinder this man; his personal priorities hindered him. In the man’s mind, he was not denying the call, but simply saying, “I’ll follow You when I’m ready.”

This man’s response brought his priorities to light. His attitude of delayed obedience was actually disobedience.

Jesus was not asking for commitment to Him alone and nothing else, but all other commitments must flow out of and be superseded by our commitment to Him. Jesus does not require us to abandon family and other responsibilities. First Timothy 5:8 explains the validity of other commitments, especially to family: “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

Jesus knows what it costs to follow Him. Jesus has always known exactly what it takes for His followers to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. Thus, His response was not one of disrespect for the man's family, but a call to the greater commitment to the kingdom of God. We display our commitment to Christ as a top priority. Following Jesus is not an important thing; it's the *most* important thing!

What are some ways we delay our obedience to Jesus today?

QUESTION #3

Luke 9:61-62

61 Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

The third would-be follower spoke up and made the proclamation, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." At first glance, this third man has one step up on the one who wanted to bury his father, because, really, how long could saying goodbye take? However, this man's commitment to follow Christ was derailed by one word: *but*.

This man started off in the right direction, but he quickly got turned around because Jesus was not his first priority. He wasn't concerned first and foremost with following the Lord and seeking the kingdom. He may have been concerned about what his family would think or do when they found out he was leaving them for Jesus. It was more than just a matter of saying goodbye. He surely

had strong family ties, which is why he wanted to see them, but if this man returned to his family, they could have talked him out of following Jesus. They might remind him of his responsibilities or “guilt” him into staying.

Jesus knew if the man went back, he wouldn’t go forward, so He quickly addressed the issue by saying, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

You can’t plow a field while you are looking back. Your lines wouldn’t be straight. Your rows would probably be on top of each other. Even Hesiod the Greek poet said something similar around 700 BC: “Let a ...fellow ... follow them, ... who will attend his work and drive a straight furrow and is past the age of gaping after his fellows, but will keep his mind on his work.”¹ Jesus took this practical truth and enriched it with a greater meaning: we can’t move forward in Christ, if we’re looking back toward our old lives.

How does looking back hinder us from moving forward and following Jesus?

QUESTION #4

The apostle Paul put this principle to practice in his own life. He wrote: “But one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14).

You likely know people who are continually pulled back into their old lives. Or others who talk about “the good old days.” It seems impossible for them to live in the present. In reality, they struggle to understand how good the present is. If we spend our time looking over our shoulder at the past, focusing on what might have been or even continuing to live in the sin of the past, we will not be fit for effectiveness in the kingdom of God. Looking back reflects a divided heart, and we cannot follow Christ with a divided heart.

At the end of verse 62, Jesus reminded us that we are not “fit for the kingdom of God” if we keep looking back. To follow Christ, we must completely deny ourselves. God most likely will not take away all our earthly possessions, nor will He ask us to leave our families and friends. But to follow Jesus we must be willing to give up all those things. We can neither look backward nor allow other things to distract us from the joyful life of following Jesus. Following Jesus is worth it, because Jesus is worth it.

From this account, how would you summarize the costs of following Christ?

QUESTION #5

LOOKING BACK

Sometimes in life we focus too much on the rear view mirror. Things that happened in the past overshadow the present and the future.

In the past year, have you spent more time looking backward through your rear view mirror or forward through your windshield? What steps can you take every day to keep looking forward?

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LIVE IT OUT

Jesus allows no shortcuts to following Him. The cost is high, but the reward is great: a full, joy-filled life now and forever. This life is ours in Christ, if we choose to truly follow Him. Consider taking one or more of these steps as you follow Jesus every day:

- ▶ **Let go of the past.** The rearview mirror is a useful tool in driving, but there is a reason that it is not the size of the windshield. Do not let the past become more important than where God is leading you today. Focus on Christ daily as you follow Him and embrace lies ahead.
- ▶ **Evaluate your priorities.** Realize following Jesus includes no guarantee of comfort. Look for ways your desire for personal comfort has hindered you from truly following Jesus. Remove those hindrances and allow Jesus to have top priority.
- ▶ **Follow Jesus with immediate obedience.** If there is an area in your life where you have delayed your obedience, understand that this is disobedience. Repent and act immediately on what you know Christ is calling you to do.



END NOTES

1. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/works.htm>, lines 442-443.