

Luke 9:51-62 The Word of the Lord from Luke 9: “When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.” This is the Word of the Lord.

I. A Face Set, and What Follows

The Gospel of Luke can be divided into two parts, and our Gospel lesson starts the second. It's a somber transition, especially considering what's just happened. Jesus has just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration. He's been transformed before Peter, James and John so that His robes are as white as lightning. He's been joined by Moses and Elijah, who have spoken with Him about His exodus, His departure. And His Father has just testified, “This is My Son, My chosen One; listen to Him.” Next thing you know in Luke 9, Jesus comes down from the mountain and heals a boy of an unclean spirit. Then things start to change, because He tells the disciples that He will soon be delivered into the hands of men.

It's only a couple of verses after that that we arrive at our lesson for today. The days draw near for Him to be taken up—the crucifixion is getting close, so He sets His face to go to Jerusalem. He sets His face—In today's vernacular—he has tunnel vision. Once upon a time, Isaiah prophesied of the Savior, “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame” (Isaiah 50:6-7 ESV). That prophesied suffering is near, waiting in Jerusalem, and Jesus sets out to meet it for your salvation.

His time to prepare His disciples is growing short, too; so in our text for today, He does much to teach them about being His disciples.

He sends messengers ahead to a Samaritan village, to prepare the way of the Lord so that the people are ready to receive Him when He arrives. But when Jesus draws near, they people don't want Him there. His face is set toward Jerusalem, and they want nothing of that. “Move along, Jesus. Go away.” James and John take exception: these Samaritans have just rudely snubbed the Son of God, so they ask Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Jesus says no: in fact, He rebukes James and John. Following Jesus isn't about destroying anyone who doesn't fall in behind or making their lives miserable as they regret their mistake—that's the way of worldly kings. Instead, Jesus leaves the Samaritans be, alive and well and—God willing—ready to hear His Word another day.

From the Samaritans and James and John, we're reminded that following Jesus isn't about getting your way. It's about patiently, faithfully sticking to God's Word, even when you're opposed for it. It's trusting that Jesus is the Lord, even when it seems like He is not.

As Jesus and His disciples move along, a man approaches and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." It's a rocky start to a quick conversation. "I will follow you?" Students don't choose their rabbis: rabbis select their students. None of the Twelve chose Jesus, but He chose each one and said to them, "Follow Me." Furthermore, from Jesus' answer it seems that the man has a pretty rosy picture: rather than look at the face set to go to Jerusalem, the man is thinking of miracles and wonders, that following Jesus will mean peace and prosperity, home and property. But the picture Jesus paints isn't so pretty as He says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Following Jesus isn't about gathering comfort and wealth here. If the man is to follow Jesus wherever He goes, he's going to follow Him to the Praetorium, to Calvary and into the tomb.

A verse later, Jesus invites a man, saying, "Follow Me." The man is beckoned by the Savior, called to be His disciple; and while he's not opposed, he has some loose ends to tie up first: "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus' answer sounds less than sensitive as He responds, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." This exchange leaves some loose ends: some have pointed out that there's no proof that the man's father is anywhere near death, that the man is saying, "I will follow You, but You must take second place to my father." It might be that he wants to preserve family peace, to follow Jesus only after his unbelieving father is dead and no longer knows. Whatever is true at home, Jesus makes this clear: one is to have no other gods before Him, including those people we hold dear. It is worth recalling the way in which Peter, Andrew, James, John, Matthew and the rest responded to these same words—Immediately they left what they were doing and followed. They understood, as this man should have understood, that it is time to move from death to life, and that life is found and given in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Ironically, that proclamation of life will be about Jesus who sets His face and goes to His death to deliver the world from death to life.

From this we're reminded that following Jesus isn't about living the same way as the world with an added bit of joy. It's about leaving death behind and having life in Christ, even if that life in Christ seems strange to those closest to you, to

those whose respect you desire the most. Even if it means you're a foreign missionary to family and friends.

There's one more would-be disciple in the text, another one who wants to choose Jesus rather than Jesus choosing Him. He probably heard the previous man's response and wanted to piggy-back on to our Savior's words. He says, "I will follow You, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus responds, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Perhaps the man's idea of farewell is to spend weeks or months tying up some loose ends, getting the harvest in and whatever else, before he actually follows Jesus. But that's in stark contrast to the Twelve disciples who have followed Him from the beginning. Remember, after the resurrection, when Jesus said to Peter, "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18 ESV). That's discipleship—following Jesus faithfully when you are taken where you do not want to go.

From this we're reminded that following Jesus isn't a casual, "I'll follow you when there's nothing else on the schedule" sort of deal. It's "follow now." It's "follow the Son whose face is set on Jerusalem." It's "cast aside every idol, take up your cross and follow Him."

This is an urgent matter because it is a matter of life and death. One is either dead in sin or alive in Christ; and if you are to cling to other things and be a disciple of convenience, then you are not a follower of the One who sets His face and goes to the cross for your salvation. That's what Jesus teaches His disciples as the second half of the Gospel of Luke begins.

II. Following Jesus Today

It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus. In fact, it's beyond you from the start. You could never be a follower of Jesus if He did not say, "Follow Me." But so He has. He said, "Follow Me" when He said, "I baptize you." He repeated it today when He said through a pastor's mouth, "I forgive you all of your sins." So that you might be a follower of Jesus, the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctified and kept you—and keeps you—in the one true faith. It is only because Jesus has called you that you can be His follower in the first place.

And now that you are His disciple, it is hard to remain a follower. Jesus teaches this in the Gospel lesson in a rather radical way: either you follow Him down the road to the cross or you don't. That call to discipleship remains, but it's different.

Jesus doesn't call you to leave everything you have and faithfully follow Him. Rather, He calls you faithfully to follow Him exactly where you are.

That sounds less intimidating, but it can be just as difficult. The Lord has given to you people and things that you value very highly where you are, and you are set free from sin to be a steward of those things and a servant to those people. In fact, that stewardship and service are part of following Him. However, you will always be tempted to turn these very things into idols that you would follow first, before Jesus. One way to measure this is to examine how you spend your time when these gifts of God interfere with worship and prayer, or how you devote spare time and resources when they interfere with tithes and offerings.

There's another, more painful measure of all of this: it is the measurement of loss. It is easy to be a follower of Jesus when it is given to you to enjoy the gifts that he gives: a job you love, people you love, a home you enjoy, security, family, health. But remember: the things that you treasure most are also the most likely things to become idols. If you are honest with yourself, you'll honestly admit that there are some things that would make it very hard to follow Jesus if you lost them. If you had to grieve the loss of that person or that thing, it would be difficult to follow Jesus because you would feel betrayed or abandoned by Him, or perhaps because you just didn't see the point in doing anything like following anymore.

There are gifts of God that I hold dear and treasure thankfully, and I know that were I to lose them, the Lord and I would have an altercation. That is not to my credit: it is simply a recognition of my sinful flesh. The temptation to stop following would be there, and it would only be by His ongoing grace and mercy that I would follow. The same is true for you. We can see people and things. We can't see Christ and salvation. We usually treasure more the things we're given to see, not the things we're given to believe.

So the law lessons of discipleship are given in this text for you and me. Facing loss and hurt, you'll be like James and John, wanting to call down fire from heaven on your enemies—wanting the Lord to knock some heads together and prove He's boss right now. You'll want to make your following Him conditional on Him healing right now, restoring peace right now, returning what was lost right now. But when James and John tried to run discipleship that way, Jesus rebuked them. He kept His face set toward Jerusalem and kept going to the cross. Hard as it is as long as the devil goads us, following Jesus doesn't mean we get to hold onto things in a world that is passing away. It means that, because Jesus set His face and went to Jerusalem, you're not going to pass away. Despite your sin and your presence in this world of loss, you're going to

live forever.

Tempted to idolize possessions and people, you'll be like the three who wanted to follow Jesus in our text. You'll want to add "as long as" and make discipleship conditional: I will follow "as long as I may keep the conveniences and schedule that I like," "as long as it does not disturb the family peace," "as long as the Lord does not permit me to lose what I value most," "as long as I don't have to leave where I am," "as long as it doesn't conflict with my plans." Again, the devil doesn't play fair, and he will take the gifts of God you value most and turn them into false gods to lead you away from Jesus.

The Lord may permit such things to be kept. He may permit them to be lost. But either way, He would bid you to remain His disciple. His follower. His beloved child, redeemed by His blood.

See, Jesus set His face and went to His death for you. Where you are half-hearted in your attempts to follow Him, He wholeheartedly shed His blood and breathed His last on the cross for you. Where you would value people and things over follow Him, the sinless Son of God gave up everything— even His own life—in order to redeem you, to save you from idolatry, to make you His follower forever.

This news of His selfless sacrifice is not a guilt trip, a way to beat you up with the news that He's better at this than you. It's good news, the good news that your faith is not built upon your commitment to Jesus. It is founded on Jesus' commitment to you. And where daily, in your weakness, you will falter in your following Him, He does not cease to offer you grace upon grace so that you might be His forever.

Dear friends, give thanks for the Savior you witness in our text as He somberly, purposefully sets His face and sets out for Jerusalem. It is for your salvation, for your eternal deliverance that He does so. He has died, and He is risen for you. The face once set on Jerusalem now shines upon you, to be gracious unto you. He gives you all good things, both people and possessions; and where He permits you to hold onto them, give thanks for His kindness and follow Him. Where there is loss, give thanks that the time of loss will end for His sake—that although all things in this world eventually comes to an end, you will not. Your Savior, Jesus, calls you to follow Him, and gives you forgiveness and life to be His follower forever. So you delight to follow Him, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

