1 Kings 19:9b–21

**And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” 11And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. 13And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” 15And the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. 17And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 18Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”**

**19So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. 20And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” 21And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.**

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

**For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**

**13For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.**

**Keep in Step with the Spirit**

**16But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

**25If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.**

Luke 9:51–62

**51When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. 53But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55But he turned and rebuked them. 56And they went on to another village.**

**57As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58And 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.” 59To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” 60And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” 62Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”**

**Discipleship cost.**

I know many of you have heard the song “Rose Garden.” Remember, “I beg your pardon. I never promised you a rose garden.” When I studied this text I couldn’t help but think of it.

Look at how Jesus handles all three interactions with new, potential disciples.  He doesn’t pull punches, does He?  No rose gardens promised here!  When the three potential followers interact with Jesus, He is very upfront and honest with them about all the costs associated with being His disciple.  Jesus lays out and explains all the “fine print” that people often plead ignorance to later on when things don’t work out their way in their “walk with Christ.” In fact, some might even consider His responses to be a little on the rude side. He doesn’t promise any rose gardens. He doesn’t sugar-coat. He doesn’t try the old “bait and switch” method of evangelism, luring them in with everything they want to hear and then yanking the rug out from under them later on, giving them something else.  Nope.  Jesus tells it exactly like it is.  Don’t be deceived. His Way is the way of the cross.

Now, let’s first examine these three “wannabes.” Dig a little into their realities, their motives, and their reasoning.  In doing so, we will discover that this could just have easily have been (and still sometimes is) our reality as well as we endeavor to walk with Christ in our daily lives.  First off, we start with the man who approaches Jesus boldly professing his desire to follow; a desire so strong that he’s willing to follow Jesus anywhere and everywhere.  What’s so wrong with that?  I would hope that all of us could say the same exact thing.  Well…what’s so wrong is the motivation behind the statement.

Matthew, in his parallel account, purposely tells us that this man was a Scribe, meaning he was a Jewish religious official.  If you pay attention to the chronology and timeline of the text, you discover that Jesus basically rejects and leaves the Samaritans after they reject Him.  Now, that doesn’t mean that He damned them to hell on the spot. That’s what James and John wanted to do, but that wasn’t the evangelism model Christ was following.  His is a way of mercy and grace and long-suffering patience.  He’s not a bully.  Nevertheless, the fact that Jesus did get rejected by the Samaritans and leave because “His face was set to Jerusalem” must have had a profound impact on everyone, especially this Scribe. “Rejecting Samaritans and hanging in the capital city of Jerusalem—the bustling mecca and metropolis of all things good and Jewish?  That’s something I as a scribe, want to be a part of!  I can get on board with this!”

My friends: Whether you want to believe it or not, Jesus knows your heart.  He knows your true motivations and desires, even when your lips say otherwise.  He knows the truth even when you’ve told the lie so much that you actually believe it yourself. “Everything I do is to the glory of God alone! I don’t care about praise or fame or money or anything else—just God.” Christ knew this man’s heart. So He said, **“Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”** Maybe that doesn’t mean much to you, but it was a reality check for the Scribe.

Knowing this man’s heart.  He knew what his plans, desires, and motivations were, and those plans and desires had nothing to do with true discipleship.  Basically He’s saying, “I know why you want to follow Me, and it’s for all the wrong reasons.  Ministry isn’t about slamming people you don’t like.  Ministry isn’t about making a name for yourself and having everyone shower praises upon you.  You’re not going to get rich or famous following Me.  My way is the way of my Father.  I do His will and His will alone.  Right now, His will has Me homeless, trusting only in His providence and goodness, and marching obediently, not to some proverbial rose garden, but to a criminal’s cross.  This is what the true cost of discipleship is.  Do not be deceived!” Is Jesus speaking to you?

The second wannabe fared no better, though the circumstances are a bit different.  Whereas the Scribe arrogantly pledged to follow without ever being asked or called by Christ to do so, this second guy was called by Christ to follow Him.  **“Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”** That certainly seems like a reasonable request, right?  “Lord, let me get the funeral taken care of and I’m all yours.” In fact, one could even look to the Fourth Commandment and say that this guy was honoring his father one last time.  Again, Christ knows the truth of the matter.

You see, one of the problems we encounter here is that we, as twenty-first century Christians, don’t know or understand first century Jewish burial practices.  We hear these words and simply think in terms of our funeral process, which typically lasts anywhere from a couple of days to a week.  There are arrangements to be made.  There are friends and family that have to come in from out of town.  All this takes time.  That’s what we know.

Unfortunately, that’s not what the first century reality was.  When you died in first century Jewish culture, you were buried on the same day—look no further than Christ Himself for proof.

So… Again, Jesus cut through all the garbage and hit right at the sin.  This man wanted to sit back and wait for his dad—who was quite alive still—to die sometime in the unforeseeable future.  “Lord, my dad is getting up there in age. When he finally dies I’ll be freed up to follow you.  Right now, though, family has to come first. You can have whatever is left over.” Now you can see that doesn’t exactly sound like faith, does it?  It’s selfish sin—plain and simple.  Our Lord makes it clear that this sinful selfishness is unacceptable.  “Leave the dead to bury their own dead.”

People often think that Christ wants you to do anything and everything for your family.  That’s love, right?  This may shock you, but that’s not what Christ wants.  There is one thing you must never do for the sake of your family.  You must never sacrifice your faith for the sake of your family.  If the choice must be made, then you must even surrender your ties with them for the sake of your Lord.  Too easily, however, family can and does draw us away from worship, away from Bible Study, and thus away from Christ.  What Christ demands is difficult, more than the flesh can achieve.  Christ’s point is clear: The kingdom of God and the preaching of the word are more important than anything else.  How harsh and difficult the demands of Christ are!

The third guy in this text finds this out the hard way.  **“I’ll follow you, Lord, but let me first go and bid farewell to those at home.”**  Again, this seems like a pretty reasonable request.  And how does Christ respond to such a request?  **“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”** In true Lutheran fashion, we hear that and ask, “What does this mean?”

Nothing has changed in these few verses.  Christ still knows the heart.  He knew this guy’s way.  He’d be all onboard for Jesus, that is, until the harsh realities of being a Christian would set in.  People might dislike you.  Being a Christian means sacrificing your time, talent, and treasure.  That’s where the whole “looking back” imagery comes into play.  “I didn’t know all this was entailed in the plan.  I’d like to change my answer.”

It’s not easy being a Christian, is it?  It’s not easy leaving sinful ways behind us and walking away from them.  There’s not one of us here who doesn’t occasionally miss some of the sinful things we did and the ways we were before faith became important to us.  It was fun.  It was easy.  Sin is fun.  Sin is easy.  That’s what makes it so alluring.  No worries.  Nothing to feel all guilty about.  Being a truly faithful Christian can be a real downer sometimes.  Here Christ is saying He doesn’t want someone who claims to be His loving follower, but then only laments over all those “good” times.  Would that make for a good marriage?  “I love you, but I miss the fun and the life I had before you were around.” Jesus wants people who recognize and appreciate what they have right here and right now with Him.  He wants people who want to leave it all behind—willingly—and follow Him.  Those who constantly look back while plowing make very crooked furrows.  When one is yoked to Christ and then spends all their time lamenting their sinful losses ends up with a way of faith that isn’t very straight.  In fact, not the straight and narrow way of faith or of Christ at all.

Finally, I want to point out that Luke never tells us what the wannabe’s responses are. Did they storm off mad, or maybe they heard the truth and listened. We’re never told.  And there’s good reason for that.  You see, Christ is still holding this lesson out to you this day.  This isn’t a history lesson about three guys who lived a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.  This is about you.  This is about me.  This is about our daily lies, excuses, and sinful realities.  The reason the responses are left out is because the response is still happening in your life.  The blunt truth, questions are still being asked of you by Christ.  What are you going to do about it—repent and follow or cut and run?

In faith we recognize that the reality of salvation isn’t about us and what we’ll do for Jesus, but about what He has done (and is doing) for us.  He is the One who fulfills all things for you, and has made you worthy by giving you His glory.  Because of Him, you are counted as a perfect disciple of your Lord.  He left the perfect House of His Father to become homeless and penniless.  He died a death where His own Father in heaven, who had loved Him from before the foundation of the world, utterly rejected and forsook Him—for you.

Christ never looked back to heaven, yearning to return to the “easy life” instead of obediently sucking it up and seeing His Father’s plan of redemption through to its full and glorious completion—for you.

So…as you prepare to depart now out into this fallen and sinful world of ours, understand that you are not a disciple simply because you do this, that, and the other thing for Jesus.  You have never done enough for Christ, and you never will.  You are His disciple because He has made you one.  He did not simply show you the right path and expect you to follow it on your own.  No, He walked the path for you, and when He was done, He turned around and declared you His perfect disciple for simply trusting in Him.  Do not be deceived.  The real cost of faithful discipleship is not what you pay for by simply believing in Christ.  The real cost is what Christ has paid for you in order to make you part of His family.  Into this family you have been adopted; into the heavenly household that lasts forever.

I pray that God will keep you firm and steadfast in this saving faith until He mercifully calls you home to heaven to live with Him for all eternity in true peace; the peace that surpasses all human understanding. AMEN