



The Call to Discipleship

Luke 9:20–25, 51–62

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There is a growing recognition in churches today about the need for discipleship. In what follows, I would like to describe from the Gospel of Luke what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Luke has some helpful insights about discipleship. The first eight chapters are focused on “who is Jesus?” But there’s a shift in chapter 9, where Peter with the help of the Holy Spirit realizes that Jesus is not one more in a succession of prophets and teachers. Peter says, “You are the Christ of God.” You are the Messiah, the one who is bringing the ruling power of God back into the world to heal and repair all the brokenness—whether it’s spiritual, psychological, social, or physical.

From the time Jesus’ identity is revealed, he begins to say, “Follow me.” If he is who he says he is, what does it mean to follow him? Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means setting a new priority, finding a new identity, and living a new mercy. All three are critical; they all fit together. Let’s look at them.

Setting a New Priority

Being a disciple means setting a new priority. In Luke 9:57–62 Jesus meets three eager men, all willing to follow him. Jesus’ responses to them are surprisingly blunt.

The first man says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” It’s as if Jesus is saying, “There’s nothing wrong with what you just said, but I discern a wrong attitude underneath your statement. Do you know what kind of Savior I am? I’m not the kind that rallies constituents, pulls together armies, and then triumphs. I am

a Savior who saves through being condemned, through dying, through giving my heart to be broken. Let’s apply this to one area of your life: I see that you have a home, a nice standard of living. Are you willing to put me before that? Are you willing to lose those things for me?”



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Then Jesus addresses two other men, similarly concerned with their families. One says, “I’d love to come with you, but first I have to bury my father.” The other says, “First let me go back and say good-by to my family.” There is nothing wrong with having a funeral for your father or going back to see your family, but behind these requests Jesus sees a wrong attitude of heart. He’s saying, “For you to go to your father’s funeral—or back home—would be a bad idea. I must come first.” Notice their language. In both cases they say, “Lord, first, let me do this.” Jesus says there can’t be any but first. “I must be your first priority.” That’s what he means when he says: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Anyone who plows a field must be completely focused on plowing. And following Jesus is no different, “My disciple has to be utterly focused on me.” By the way, “fit for the kingdom” is an unfortunate translation; the word there means “useful.” You might think he’s saying, “Unless you’re totally committed, you don’t qualify for my kingdom.” Of course no one qualifies for Jesus’ kingdom. It’s all by grace. He’s saying: Unless delighting Jesus, resembling him, serving him, and knowing him is your highest priority, the

healing power of the kingdom of God will not be flowing through you. You will not be a useful vehicle for it.

The second and more cryptic line is, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Obviously physically dead people can't dig graves, so the first noun must refer to the spiritually dead. To be spiritually dead means to be as blind and insensitive to spiritual reality as a physical body is to physical reality. You may be saying, "Well, I believe in Jesus, but I can't put him first right now. I've got my career; I've got to wait till my parents die, because they would be unhappy if I became a Christian... I see who he is and what he's done, but I'm not going to put him first just yet. Someday I will." When someone says, "I understand Christianity. I'm just not ready to put it at the central place in my life," then that person really doesn't understand it yet! Jesus says: Putting anything before me reveals spiritual deadness. Let the dead bury their dead. If you put your father before me, there's a spiritual deadness in your life.

Talking this harshly is not my style, but I'm afraid to mute the smelling-salts-ness of Jesus' message: Let the dead bury the dead! No one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God! Foxes have holes, birds have nests... But "I have to be the first priority in your life, or you're not a disciple; if you don't put me first in your life, it's not that you're just uncommitted or lazy, disorganized or undisciplined. No, you just don't get it! You don't really see who I am and what I've done; you don't understand the meaning of my life and work. You need to wake up!

Let me illustrate. In 1971 I heard a talk—two illustrations—that changed my life. The woman, named Barbara Boyd, said, "If somebody says to me, 'Come on in, Barbara, but stay out, Boyd,' it's a bit of a problem, because I can't separate them. It's not like the top half of me is Barbara, and the bottom half of me is Boyd. So if you won't have Boyd, you can't get Barbara. If you're going to keep the Boyd out, I can't come in at all!" She continued: "To say, 'Jesus, come into my life, forgive my sins, answer my prayers; do this for me, do that for me—but don't be the absolute master of my life; Jesus, Savior, come in; but Lord, stay out,' how can he come in at all? Because he's all Savior, and he's all Lord. He's Lord because he's Savior. He's Savior because he's Lord."

I remember her second illustration: "If the distance between the Earth and the sun, which is 92 million miles, was the thickness of a piece of paper, the diameter of our galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high. And our galaxy is less than a speck of dust in the part of the universe that we can see. And that

part of the universe might just be a speck of dust compared to all the universe. And if Jesus is the Son of God who holds all this together with the word of his power, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your personal assistant?" Then she asked us all to go outside and for one hour say nothing. "Just think about what this means to you."

She was expanding on Jesus' message: If you intellectually assent, "Yes, I think Jesus is probably the Son of God; I think he probably died for our sins," but he is not the center of your life, then you may think you understand, but you really don't. It's not just a matter of commitment or lack of discipline, there's spiritual deadness; you don't really see it, understand it, get it. Wake yourself up!

Finding a New Identity

Discipleship is not just a matter of bending your will to Jesus' will; it's melting your heart into a whole new shape. A disciple is not someone who simply sets a new priority; a disciple finds a new identity. We see this in Luke 9:23–25. At first sight verse 23 looks like it's just another way of saying set a new priority: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." But there's more to it than that. In Semitic literature, the second and third sentences often restate the first. And here the second and third sentences say, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will save it." The word life is not the word for physical life. There's a good Greek word for that: *bios*, from which we get our word biology. The Greek word that's translated "life" is *psyche*, meaning "self." He's talking—pretty radically—about the psychological, inner life. "Your old way of having an identity, of gaining a sense of self, has got to end. In a sense you have to die to it. And I can give you a whole new identity. You'll get a whole new true self."

Let's look at this more closely. Verses 24 and 25 show what he's not saying. He's not taking the typical Eastern or Western approach to identity. In Buddhism the deepest consciousness of enlightenment is losing all sense that you are an individual self. The boundaries between you and the rest of reality disappear. The Eastern way to humility, to peace, is to actually lose the sense of an individual self.

But Jesus doesn't stop at, "I want you to lose yourself." He says, "Lose yourself to find yourself," which means, "I want you to die to your old approach to identity, and get a new sense of individual self." He's

not going the Eastern way. But he's sure not going the Western way either.

W. H. Auden wrote a work called *The Age of Anxiety* in which he satirizes the modern Western obsession with "finding yourself." In it there's a great line that reads: "Miserable wicked me, / How interesting I am." Others have also noted our obsession with finding and fulfilling your deepest desires as the main thing you're supposed to do in life. It almost seems that Jesus has us in mind when he says, "You're never going to find out who you really are by trying to find out who you really are. You're going to have to lose yourself in serving me." Some things happen only as a byproduct, and identity is one of them.

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world?" (9:25). Gaining things from the world is the normal way we try to get a self. In fact, the three men at the end of Luke 9 are examples of this. Some people say you're nobody unless you have a lucrative career. People in more traditional cultures say you're nobody unless you have a family. But Jesus is saying, "If you get the whole world, it cannot give you a stable self." He says, "If you lose yourself for me..." In other words, "Instead of trying to gain a self by gaining things, build everything in your life on me, on who I am, on what I have done, then finally you'll have a true self that is stable, because you were built to know me."

A disciple is not only someone who has set a new priority, but someone whose entire identity has been reshaped and forged. But how is that possible?

Living a New Mercy

The key to setting a new priority and finding a new identity is in living a new mercy. And this is also evident in Luke 9. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and, it says in verse 52, "He sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him." They rejected him. "When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'"

Let's try to understand them. Remember that there was a prophet, named Elijah, who called down fire upon some soldiers who were seeking to arrest him. And on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus had appeared—to James and John—with Elijah and Moses. The message of the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36) was that Jesus was even greater than Moses and Elijah.

So think of the logic of the disciples: You're greater than Elijah. These people have rejected you, and that's

even worse than rejecting Elijah. That adds even more effrontery to the godhead. Shall we not bring down fire and destroy them?

This is the kind of prophet the world can relate to. But Jesus Christ doesn't rebuke the unbelieving Samaritans; he rebukes the disciples! He is the absolute un-Elijah. Can you imagine their continued perplexity if he's greater than Elijah? The soldiers come after Jesus to kill him—in the Garden—and what does he do? He heals an ear that was cut during a skirmish. Later on, the soldiers are pounding nails into his hands, and what does he say? Father, forgive them; they really don't understand what they're doing.

Why doesn't fire come down on the Samaritans? On the soldiers? The answer comes in Luke 12, where Jesus says, "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled." That's very interesting for two reasons. One is that fire, in biblical imagery, always means the judgment of God. Second, he says he comes to bring fire on the earth! This is perplexing because, after all, he has just rejected Elijah's fiery approach. Ah! Semitic literature: the second sentence is a restatement of the first; this is what he actually says, in Luke 12:49–50: "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!" He's already been baptized with water, so he's clearly talking about something else. "I've come to bring fire. How constrained I am until it's completed. I have come to undergo a baptism, how crushed I am until it's over." Why didn't the fire come down on the Samaritans or later on the soldiers? Because the fire came down on him. He was baptized. He was the one immersed in the judgment of God. He got what we deserved. This is the answer to all the riddles.

Look back over the years, and you will see that when people want to atone for their sins and be forgiven, they put a sacrifice on the altar and burn it with fire! There's something inside us that intuitively says, "That can't be enough to put away sins." That's right. All those fires were pointing to this fire. It didn't come down on the Samaritans or the soldiers, because it came down on Jesus Christ. He came to take it. He came to bear it. Luke 9:22 says, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected...and on the third day be raised to life." They rejected him; shouldn't they be rejected? He's rejected for them. The Son of Man came to be rejected and to be killed. This is the secret to the change of identity. You have to be melted and

amazed and astounded that he took the fire, the punishment, for you. And that's the key to everything else.

Here's the reason: You cannot change your identity without a radical experience of mercy! without a radical experience of grace! without a radical experience of love! I've heard people say, "You're right. I probably should change my identity, build my identity on God."

But you can't change your identity by just deciding. It's not an act of the will. A person can't just say, "You know, I'm having a problem in my life because I built my identity on my parents' expectations. I think I'll build my identity on my career and accomplishments." You can't do that! That's not transformation; that's acting. Your heart is not a computer in which you can just install a program. There's only one way that the root of your personality can be changed, and that is by an experience of love. Only when your heart experiences love from a new source beyond anything it's ever known before will your heart start to move toward that source, and begin to be deeply changed.

Thomas Chalmers, the well-known Scottish preacher, in his famous sermon "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," says it all: Seldom do any of our habits or flaws disappear by a process of extinction through reasoning or "by the mere force of mental determination." Reason and willpower are not enough. "But what cannot be destroyed may be dispossessed... The only way to dispossess [the heart] of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one." A young man, for example, may "cease to idolize pleasure, but it is only because the idol of wealth has become the stronger and gotten the ascendancy" and is enabling him to discipline himself for prosperous business. "Even the love of money ceases to have the mastery over the heart" if it's drawn into another world of ideology and politics, "and he is now lorded over by the love of power." But "there is not one of these [identity] transformations in which the heart is left without an object. Its desire for one particular object may be conquered, but... its desire for having some one object" of absolute love "is unconquerable." It is only when admitted "into the number of God's children through the faith that is in Jesus Christ [that] the spirit of adoption is poured out upon us. It is then that the heart, brought under the mastery of one great and predominate affection, is delivered from the tyranny of its former desires, in the only way that deliverance is possible." So it isn't enough to hold out a "mirror of its imperfections" to your soul. It's not enough to lecture your conscience. Rather, you must "try every

legitimate method of finding access to your hearts for the love of him who is greater than the world."

Until you're melted by the amazing sight, knowledge, and sense of Jesus taking the fire for you, you can't have that transformation of identity. You can't just decide, "I think I'm going to change my identity." It can't be done. It has to be an experience of love.

Jesus is saying that your career can't buy it for you. Even the best parents can't give it to you. "Don't give the title deed of your heart to anyone but me. Don't have any other master but me, because I'm the only one that will never leave you, and if you fail me, will forgive you."

So you have to have all three. There must be a living out of this new, radical mercy, which brings you into finding a new identity, which brings you into setting a new priority and thereof the peace.

Being a Disciple

Notice three practical things about being a disciple. First, discipleship is not an option. Jesus says that if anyone would come after me, he must follow me. If you want to come after me—it's a general term—if you want to have any experience of me, any relationship with me, you have to be a disciple. There are not two kinds of Christians: regular Christians and people who are really disciples. There's only one: to be a Christian is to be a disciple. To have anything to do with me is to follow me in the way I define it: setting a new priority, finding a new identity, experiencing living out of a new mercy.

Second, having said that it's not an option—on the other hand, it is a journey. It's narratively brilliant of Luke to note this. In verse 51 Jesus sets out on a journey toward Jerusalem. It's Jesus' journey of discipleship, "He sets his face to go to Jerusalem." And it's from the moment he begins his journey toward the cross that he begins all his teaching about discipleship. All the next nine chapters, all the teaching on discipleship, comes as he's going on a journey. This is Luke's way of saying that discipleship is a journey. In other words, on the one hand, there is a decisiveness. You have to leave. Have you left? To go on the journey means saying, "I take my hands off my life." To go on the journey means saying, "I give up my right to self-determination." To go on the journey means saying, "I will obey you, Lord, and I'll get rid of all the ifs. Not 'obey you if,' but obey. Period. I drop my conditions. I drop the ifs; they're gone!" Not until you say that have you begun the journey. However, after

your decisive beginning, the fact remains that it's a journey. It's a process that takes time. You're not going to have it all together. It's very important to keep that in mind, because if you think that discipleship is the way you're saved—that by being committed and focused and giving Jesus the priority you're going to please God and that will get you saved—you're missing the point. Look at the order. He doesn't say, "If you follow me, I'll go to the cross for you." He says, "I'm going to the cross for you, so follow me." You're not saved because you're a disciple; you're a disciple if and only if you understand what he has done to save you.

There is one last thing. The sign of true, growing, gospel disciples is their gentleness. What really amazes me about the heart of this passage is that the disciples say, "We're going to show you how intensely committed we are to you. Look at those people rejecting you. Don't you want us to bring fire down on them?!" And what does Jesus say? "Oh, just shut up. You don't get it." And here's why.

My experience is that committed disciples of any religion, philosophy, or political cause are hard on themselves and on other people too. They're committed to the cause, so why aren't you committed to the cause? You should all be committed to the cause; what's the matter with you? But the gospel is utterly different. The harder you are on yourself and the gospel, the easier you are on other people. Jesus Christ is saying: My disciples are not terrorists. My disciples know they're saved by grace, so when they look at people who aren't doing it right, they don't say, "Why aren't you as good as we are? Why aren't you as committed as we are?" They don't call fire down from heaven. Jesus says to his disciples: You don't understand at all. You haven't had the transformation of identity, because you don't yet understand my mercy. You don't know what I've done for you, because as yet you can't, but someday you will. These disciples are probably racist; notice this: they're calling down fire on the half-breed Samaritans. A lot of Israelites have done a lot of things to reject Jesus, but this is the first time any of his followers wanted fire to come down. There's racism maybe; there's self-righteousness definitely! Self-righteousness, bigotry, stridency, harshness—they go away, the more you become a disciple. They go away as your awareness of Jesus taking the fire for you becomes more central in your heart. And that's a sign that you're not just trying to save yourself, not just being religious, not just trying to save yourself through your commitment.

Are you becoming more gentle? More tolerant? More gracious with people around you? More kind? Follow Jesus. He'll give you what you need. He's a wonderful counselor. One guy comes and says, "I'm ready to follow you wherever you go." Jesus says, "Go home and think about it." Another guy says, "I want to go home and think about it." Jesus says, "Follow me." What? Because he's the perfect counselor. All other counseling theories look flat next to his, because he never gives you a template. He gives you exactly what you need. Follow him, and he will give you exactly what you need. He will love you singularly. He will love the real you. He will love you into a whole new identity.

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Timothy Keller was born and raised in Pennsylvania, and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, which he started in 1989 with his wife, Kathy, and three young sons. For over twenty years he has led a diverse congregation of young professionals that has grown to a weekly attendance of over 5,000. He is also President of Redeemer City to City, which has helped to launch over 200 churches in 35 cities. More recently, Dr. Keller's books, including the New York Times bestselling *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*, have sold over one million copies and been translated into 15 languages.

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Discipleship of Heart and Mind

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