

NO TURNING BACK

Speaker: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

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Scripture: Luke 9:57-62

Luke 9: 57-62

"⁵⁷ As they were going on the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go."⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."⁵⁹ And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father."⁶⁰ But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."⁶¹ Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say goodbye to those at my home."⁶² But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Would you pray with me?

Almighty, eternal God, our heavenly Father. We ask that You would illumine our hearts, touch our wills which often are so stubborn, and then align us with Your Holy will that we may be able to hear clearly from You, all that You have for us from this passage. Touch us in ways that we can be fertile ground for all that You want to sow into us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I know that after having read this passage, you're probably thinking: Pastor, we had a fairly extended run on discipleship, and we thought it was all over. But here you come up with one more chapter. And I was surprised myself. I thought we were done. And yet, there's this one verse that drew me.

- We looked at submission, that as disciples we need to submit to God's holy will for us.
- We looked at obedience, that even after hearing from Him, we need to be able to follow through on what we hear.
- We looked at fruitfulness, that as disciples, the litmus test for us that we were doing what God wanted us to do was that there would be fruit in our lives.
- We looked at longevity – we need to be faithful to the end, that we hold fast, that we keep the faith, and that we finish well.
- We looked at loving one another – how important it was for us to love, and how we needed to rely on the agape love that comes only from God, for us to be able to love one another.

But this line, the 62nd verse, caught my attention, and it says: But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." It really spoke to me because the assumption here is that once you put your hand to the plough, it means that you have made a decision. Then when you turn and look back rather than forward, it means that there's a loss of focus. And then Jesus says: If something like this happens, you're not fit for the kingdom of God. You're not fit for the service of the King. And those are pretty strong words to hear.

But I think we need to be able to look at it in context for us to get the whole drift of what Jesus is saying.

v. 57 Three men are really interacting with Jesus. Two offered to follow Him, and the other was actually called by Jesus to follow Him. Then Jesus makes a point about the nature of discipleship. He points out, through each of these interactions, something that is critical for our understanding of what discipleship entails and what it means for each one of us to be true disciples of Jesus.

1. "Wherever You go, Jesus, I will follow You."

That's a pretty broad statement. And Jesus said to him: "The foxes have holes; the birds of the air have nests. The Son of man has nowhere to lay His head." Foxes, after they've done all that they

want to do – run around, scare people, scare other animals, eat all the food, at night they can go back to a place that they call home. The birds of the air, they fly around, they appear so carefree, they glide with the wind, they flap their wings when they are going against the wind. But at the end of the day, when they are tired, they go back to a nest. But the Son of man doesn't have a place to lay His head.

So, Jesus is looking at him and saying, "Think very carefully before you say that you will follow Me wherever I go. For where I go is fraught with inconveniences. It will not be easy. It will be hard; it will be difficult. You have to think carefully." And all of us know in our own lives, we have lines that we have set, where we say: Personally, I won't cross this line. And I'm not talking about discipleship; just in terms of life itself.

I have cousins who go backpacking. In fact, a couple of months back I was sitting with them, and they were talking about how they went up the trails in San Jose or one of those places, just taking a backpack. I was in awe of them. I said, "My goodness! You mean you just go out with only a backpack and everything that you need is in that backpack?" and they said, "Yes. When we get hungry, we have fishing rods, we fish and then light a fire." And I said, "Nobody makes you do this? I mean, you do this of your own volition?" I couldn't believe it, that anyone would want to do things like this. I'd never do it. imagine sleeping out in the woods by yourselves, and thinking that every light you see is the eyes of a lion or a liger looking back at you. But they do it. Backpacking.

I remember a confirmation class, and one of the girls came in limping. I asked her what happened, and she said that she was part of a triathlon. I said, "What does that mean?" She replied, "We run for 5km, swim for about 1km and then cycle for another 15km. I said, "Do you get paid to do this? You do it just for yourself? I get tired just listening to you. I feel that I've done my exercise for the day just listening to you."

We all have our boundaries. We all have lines in the sand that we have put in our lives that say: I'm not going to cross. And the same way, we have lines in our walk with Jesus that we say: Lord, I will go this far with You, but not any further than that. When it starts getting inconvenient, Lord, that's my boundary. And Jesus is saying to this man, "There are no boundaries. I don't even have a place to stay. So when you say that you will follow where I go, think very, very carefully."

What was Jesus doing? Jesus was testing his commitment. It's one thing to grandiosely say, "I'll follow You wherever You go," and quite another thing to consider what it will entail. Which raises the question for us: What conveniences do we not want to give up in our walk with the Lord? What conveniences are we holding on to that say, Lord, anything else I will do, but not this. My following You doesn't include these areas. They are too hard, too inconvenient.

One of the misnomers in terms of discipleship or following Jesus that I've heard over the years is that when we begin to follow Jesus, life gets boring. I hear this a lot from young people. "I want to enjoy life, and then I will decide about all this religious stuff." What makes you think that life is boring with Jesus? I tell you, from the time that I met Him, got into following after Him, there has been so much of joy. There's nothing that I did before that can come close to what I've experienced in this journey with Him. Nothing! There's nothing that I think I've given up that can come in and corrupt the relationship that I have with Him. You think that Jesus takes away things from you and then leaves you with a boring life? no, He adds to your life. there's so much of excitement in following after Him because He lets you do the things that He has endowed you with. Every purpose that God has for you – He scripted your DNA. All that you need to do in this world, He has already put within you. And He says: For you to allow that to come out, I let My power come in and ignite that. So, you'll have the

best time of your life. but there will be inconveniences too. The Son of man has no place to lay His head.

2. “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.”

This was in answer to the command – “Follow Me!” Permit me first to go and bury my father. Seems like a reasonable request. Jesus sounds a little harsh because He replies and says, “Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God,”

There’s been a lot of speculation by scholars about what he meant by saying: Let me go and bury my father. I’ve come to the conclusion myself, (just Cecil Clements commentary) that his father was not dead. There was no immediacy to it, because in Jewish culture, if somebody died, you would be there, you would be part of the mourning, you would be with the family. You wouldn’t be out following somebody else at a time of death. So, I’m kind of convinced that there was no immediate death. What he really meant was: I have a responsibility towards my family in that, when my father dies, I’ve got to take care of things. This meant – Jesus, I’ll come and follow You, but it depends on the lifetime that my father has. When his lifetime is over, then I will come and follow You. And Jesus was looking at the excuse he was making not to follow rather than actually talking about the death of his father. And Jesus is saying: That’s an excuse you are making.

What did He mean by saying, “Let the dead bury the dead.” He was saying: Listen! There is nothing that you can do for the dead. It’s done and dusted. Nothing! You can bury whatever, and it’s over. But the living you still have with you. They still need to hear the gospel. But, as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God. The urgency here is the living, not the dead. The living, those who have breath still, go to them and tell them about the kingdom of God.” Jesus was talking about such urgency in the first century.

Imagine, the urgency that we have in the 21st century. We look around and we say: if there’s ever been a need for the gospel, if there’s ever been a need for absolute truth, it’s now. Because today, everything is relative. You don’t know what’s true. There are people on both sides who claim truth. Why? Because truth has become relative. There’s nothing absolute anymore. And yet, that was the reason Jesus came to this earth. He said, “I came to testify about the truth,” because even at that time, truth was beginning to disappear. Jesus is saying, “There’s a world out there who needs to hear; don’t give Me any excuses.” And I wondered: Do we have that sense of urgency of care for people out there?

I started doing my podcast during COVID, and when I started it, the Lord laid very clearly on me that the podcast would be just scripture. And I’d never don’t anything like that before. I said, “Lord, I’ve got to explain it. I’ve got to elaborate on it and do my thing.” The Lord said, “No! You just do My thing. Just speak scripture.” And He gave me this verse: My word will not return back void. And over the last 3 or 4 years, I’ve been doing the podcast faithfully.

I got a letter from a lady about 4 or 5 months back, and she said, “I got your podcast and I was so blessed as I listened to it. I just wanted to let you know.” I wrote back to her thanking her for letting me know. Then about 3 or 4 weeks back, I got a letter from her again where she shared a bit of her background. She said, “My husband and I are divorced. I live in the US; he lives in the UK. He is in the last stages of cancer, so I decided to go and spend the last days with him. I went there and I had your podcast of Psalm 65, or 67, I don’t remember. I played it about 10 or 15 times for him during those days. At the end, he accepted Jesus in his heart before he died. I just wanted to let you know the power of that psalm.”

My Word will not return back void. Every moment, every hour, people are dying. And Jesus is saying: Don't concentrate on the dead. There is nothing more you can do with them. But there's living people out there who need to hear about Me and the kingdom of God. And the question for you and me is: Are they on your lips? Are you sharing Jesus with people? Are you letting them know that they can call upon the name of the Lord and they will be saved? Beloved, what excuses do we have? What excuses are we harboring and holding tight to us that prevent us from actually being the kind of disciple that God wants us to be? What priority has overtaken the priority and the immediacy of sharing the gospel of Jesus?

3. I will follow You, Lord, but first permit me to say goodbye to those at home.

And Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Jesus was talking about focus, about keeping your eyes fixed upon Him.

Remember Peter? "Lord, if it is You, invite me to come to You on the water." And Jesus says, "Come." And Peter's out of the boat in a trice, and he's walking on the water towards Jesus. Can you imagine how many times he must have told this story to his grandchildren? He probably never told them about the time that he went down, but that he got out of the boat and he walked on water. The vagaries of the sea had always dictated everything about him because he was a fisherman. Now, suddenly he had the power; he was on top of the water. The Greek symbol for impossibility was a fragment of wave with 2 feet on top of it. and here was Peter walking on the water until he took his eyes off Jesus and looked down at the waves. And he went down.

Where is your focus today, beloved? Is your focus on Jesus complete, like a flint looking at Him or at the things that are in the past that are holding you? Maybe you started out well, but today you look at the things that you have done – maybe some kind of addictive behavior, or some kind of sin, maybe just some kind of a longing for something that is not part of what should be part of a disciple's life? You've got your hand on the plough, but you're looking back!

You know what happens when you're ploughing and you turn around? Jeff Greenway was president of Asbury Seminary when I was there for a few years. When he was growing up, he worked on a farm and he says, "I was taught how to plough. When we ploughed, you were told to find a spot that is directly ahead and then watch that spot and never take your eyes off it. When you did that, you went in an absolute straight line all the way without any deviation. But there were times when I would just look back to see how I was doing, and then come back again. Then I'd go a little further and look back again. When I got to the end and looked back at the furrow at the point where I turned back to look, I had gone off track. That's what happens when we turn and look back.

I wonder today, as we think about discipleship, whether there are things that are pulling us, whether we've turned around, we've taken our eyes off Jesus, and our eyes are on something else. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." We all know that verse, but do we believe it enough to trust it? That's a different story altogether. The power is not in knowing the verse; the power is in believing and trusting the verse with our situations.

I met many, many people who tell me that years back, God had called them to ministry. But we just need to pay off the loans and then I'll get in. then that happens, and the loans get paid off. Then it's the children's education they have to pay for. And then something else comes and 20-25 years later, they are still trying to follow the Lord. and my question always is: Do you not think that when you follow the Lord, and you say, 'Lord, I trust You,' that the loans become God's problem? It's not yours anymore. The children's education is not yours. You keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and Jesus will take care of everything else.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all of these things, beloved, all of these things that are around will get taken care of. But so often those things are the things that we concentrate on. And the moment we do it, then we have disconnected from the power of God. And we are saying, "Now it's up to me." Now think for a minute. You're telling the omnipotent God, "Excuse me, I'll handle this one. I've got it. I've got the power." That's how silly it is. And He says, "Just follow Me; everything else, I'll take care of."

That's the call for discipleship. It's a call that says, "I want you 100%. Don't give me 99% of yourself. 100%. Jump in and go all the way." The thing is that Jesus Himself modelled that right there for them. Because when you read the context of scripture here, Jesus was enroute to Jerusalem. He knew what was waiting for Him in Jerusalem. And yet, He says, "That is My purpose. For that I was born. I'm going to do that even if it's difficult, even if it's going to be painful, even if I'm ridiculed, even if I'm killed. That's My purpose and I will do it."

So, Jesus wasn't talking to them about these things while He was doing something else. Like a flint, His eyes were set on Jerusalem for the salvation of humanity. Beloved, the whole idea of being a disciple is to become like the Master. That's why He pulls the rug on the past, the lack of focus. And He says, "I am sufficient. Keep your eyes fixed on Me."

We end by coming to the table. It's the most beautiful representation of the finished work of Jesus, that He went, He followed through right to the very end. I wonder today whether some of us are stuck midway in the field, this huge harvest field that Jesus said is vast. The harvest is huge and you're somewhere in the middle, but you're stuck for some reason. You drew a line. You said, "I can't do this relying on my own strength. Not sure how this would go." Whatever, you've taken your focus off of the Lord. maybe you're looking back and so you've stopped and you're stuck there.

Maybe you're saying: I'm fine accepting You as Savior, Lord, but Lordship is a different thing. Savior is a moment in time; Lordship is the whole of your lifetime. And so, you've given up midway. And this whole idea about putting your hand to the plough and turning back, talks about giving up halfway. Holding the plough – you are committed, but not anymore. And I wonder whether that's where you are today, whether there's some of you sitting here who are saying: I started out well. I had great enthusiasm, fervor, zeal. But somewhere along the line, I've gotten complacent. I'm just sitting, biding my time till the train horn comes for the heavenly destination.

And Jesus is saying: There's a world out there that needs true disciples of Jesus. And stopping in the middle of the field doesn't necessarily mean just in terms of our calling. It means every aspect of your life. if you pull back in some aspect of your life, it can affect every other area. It could be worship – it could be that you started out thinking: I love to worship, and today you just don't worship anymore. Maybe you used to come here and sing; today you just come here and stand. The disconnect is so huge. Maybe it's your prayer life that you got stuck in. maybe there's a time when you prayed so much and today it's a perfunctory prayer that is just thrown up enroute to whatever you're doing. Or maybe it's reading the word of God that had a deep sense of love for, and today it's not there. I wonder if you're stuck somewhere in the middle of the field with your head turned back.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you. All these things I said. It's so lovely that we come at the end of the sermon, to partake of the Lord's Supper because it gives us a moment where we come to this transaction, and we realize the fulfillment of a man who walked on this earth, whose divine purposes were met fully. And that's the challenge for you and me. God has written His DNA only specific to you – His purpose, His plan. He has given us time on this earth. The question is: When we get to heaven, will we be able to say, 'Lord,

everything that You scripted for me got done.' Or will we have to say, 'Lord, I got caught in the middle of the field. I'm so sorry Lord.'

As we come to the Lord's Supper, I want you to just understand the power of the Name of Jesus. There's a song that I love; I think it's by Charity Gayle. It talks about the power in the Name of Jesus, and it has such a powerful meaning.

I just want to speak the name of Jesus
Over every heart and every mind
'Cause I know there is peace within Your presence
I speak Jesus

I just want to speak the name of Jesus
Til' every dark addiction starts to break
Declaring there is hope and there is freedom
I speak Jesus

'Cause Your name is power
Your name is healing
Your name is life
Break every stronghold
Shine through the shadows
Burn like a fire.

I just want to speak the name of Jesus
Over fear and all anxiety
To every soul held captive by depression
I speak Jesus.

Your name is power
Your name is healing
Your name is life
Break every stronghold
Shine through the shadows
Burn like the fire."

Your Name is power... Just the name of Jesus – against fear, against depression, anxiety. All these things hold us back.

Dearly beloved, go from here knowing that He has called you to be His disciple and He will equip you to be one. Amen.