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I Will Follow You, Lord, 1 Kings 19:15-21, Luke 9:51-62

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, give me the courage to follow you and to listen to the words that you have given us and to act accordingly. Amen.

I wonder what a church does, what does a congregation look like when it follows our Lord, Jesus Christ. What is the cost of discipleship or the cost of entering and receiving the Kingdom of God? What does that church look like?

When I worshipped in Oak Tree Presbyterian Church, there was a parishioner who bragged about attending services in New York. He said they preached about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed, or is addressed so rarely that I have as yet been unable to hear it, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ.... So, what stands in place of the Christian message?

Entertainment for Christians. An ethical and social idealism borne by a faith in progress that--claims the right to call itself 'Christian'. And in the place of the church as the congregation of believers in Christ there stands the church as a social corporation.

Anyone who has seen the weekly program of one of the large New York churches, with their daily, indeed almost hourly events, teas, lectures, concerts, charity events, opportunities for sports, games, bowling, dancing for every age group, what more could you possibly need to hold your interest.

The church is no longer the place where the congregation hears and preaches God's word, but rather the place where one acquires secondary significance as a social entity for this or that purpose. Luke 9:51-62 clearly marks the cost for those entering and receiving God's Kingdom.

I am reminded of the great line attributed to Mark Twain, "It's not the things I don't understand in the Bible that worry me, it's the things I understand perfectly clear that worry me." Jesus is perfectly clear: he is saying that his obedience to the Father--setting his face toward Jerusalem--will cost him his life.

His obedience will set him apart from the foxes and the birds: he has no place to rest and no place to call home. Dietrich Bonhoeffer a German pastor, theologian, was right when he said, "When Jesus bids someone to come and follow, he bids them to come and die."

What is clear in Luke 9 is both the urgency and focus that marks the call to follow Jesus in and for the world. There is no time to wait, even to bury one's own father. "Let the dead bury the dead," says Jesus. Now is the time to go and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Now is the time to follow. It can't wait. It must happen right now.

On April 21st, in the year 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez sailed into the harbor of Vera Cruz, Mexico. He brought with him only about 600 men, and yet over the next two years his vastly outnumbered forces were able to defeat Montezuma and all the warriors of the Aztec empire, making Cortez the conqueror of all Mexico.

How was this incredible feat accomplished, when two prior expeditions had failed even to establish a colony on Mexican soil? Here's the secret. Cortez knew from the very beginning that he and his men faced incredible odds. He knew that the road before them would be dangerous and difficult.

He knew that his men would be tempted to abandon their quest and return to Spain. And so, as soon as Cortez and his men had come ashore and unloaded their provisions, he ordered their entire fleet of eleven ships destroyed.

His men stood on the shore and watched as their only possibility of retreat burned and sank. And from that point on, they knew beyond any doubt there was no return, no turning back. Nothing lay behind them but empty ocean. Their only option was to go forward, to conquer or die.

Let me tell you another story from the Old Testament book of 1 Kings [19:15-21]. It involves the prophet Elijah and the calling of his attendant and eventual successor. God told Elijah to anoint a new king of Aram along with a new king over Israel, and to anoint Elisha as prophet in his place.

When Elijah found Elisha, he threw his mantle over him, but Elisha wanted to go say goodbye to his parents first. Elijah told him to go home, but Elisha returned only to slaughter his oxen, boil them and serve it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

Here we see Elisha, a simple farmer, who is suddenly and unexpectedly approached by the famous prophet Elijah and invited to accompany him and serve him as his personal attendant. When Elisha requests time to first go home and say good-bye to his parents, Elijah makes it clear that the decision to come is entirely Elisha's to make.

"What have I done to you?" means "What claim do I have on you?" And the implied answer is "none". In other words, Elisha is free to stay or go.

In response, Elisha not only chooses to accept the call, but he slaughters his oxen and feeds them to his neighbors, burning his plowing equipment to cook the meat. By doing this, he publicly and irrevocably declares his intention to leave his former way of life and follow Elijah.

My topic this morning is commitment, by following Jesus. and so far, I've given you two powerful illustrations of that concept. You've heard of "burning your bridges;" now you've heard of "burning your boats," and "burning your oxen." What does it mean to be committed? It means making a firm choice.

It means not worrying about keeping your options open or leaving yourself a way out. It means pursuing something wholeheartedly, with no contingency plans to fall back on. It means being 100% sold out to be a Christian; not holding anything back, not keeping anything in reserve.

Now, the idea of being this committed – to anyone, or anything – makes some people uncomfortable. It feels risky. It feels like they're going out on a limb. What if the person you've committed yourself to lets you down? What if the cause turns out to be not as worthy as you thought? And there's a lot to be said for caution.

God isn't calling us to be reckless or foolhardy. He doesn't want us to just rush into things without counting the cost. But once we've determined the path we're going to take; once we've discerned to the best of our ability what God is calling us to do; then what he wants are sold-out followers who won't look back when the going gets tough.

What he wants are disciples who are so committed to Him that they will burn their bridges, or their boats, or their oxen, disciples who will jettison whatever is holding them back, and who will follow him wherever he leads. Are you that kind of disciple? Do you want to be?

Let me tell you something God hates: God hates wishy-washiness. God is not a fan of uncertainty. He doesn't care for fence-sitters. He isn't pleased by people who can't quite make up their minds, who are forever weighing their options, who can never settle on a course of action.

God isn't calling us to act rashly, without any thought to the consequences. But what He wants are people who will follow Him with joyful abandon, without regret, without looking back. Listen to the words of Jesus:

"He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my

family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'" – Luke 9:59-62

Let me ask you – are you sold out for God? Are you determined to seek after God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Or are you trying to have it both ways?

Are you trying to serve God just enough to keep him happy, just enough to keep your conscience quiet, while at the same time you're also following the things of the world?

Friends, there is no more certain way to make yourself miserable than to try to serve God, and to also serve the world, and to also serve yourself. Do you know what Jesus said? It's better to be a wholehearted pagan, following the world with all your strength.

At least then, there's hope for your conversion. But a halfhearted, so-called "Christian" is something God despises. It nauseates him. It makes him want to throw up. Listen:

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea written by John: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.'" – Revelation 3:15-17

Have you ever been hot, and sweaty, and thirsty, just longing for a cold drink, but instead you get lukewarm tap water? You can barely swallow it. It's not refreshing; on the contrary, it's nauseating. And that's how Christ feels about a lukewarm disciple.

So, what are you? Hot? Cold? Or just disgustingly tepid? Think about that, while you listen to what Jesus says about being single-minded: "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." – Luke 16:13

On the surface, this doesn't seem impossible at all. But the Scriptures tell us that it is impossible – impossible! – to serve God and at the same time serve anything else. You can't serve God and serve money. You can't serve God and serve safety and security. You can't serve God and serve career advancement. Why? Because we can only run full speed in one direction.

Because there's only room in our hearts for one consuming passion. And the object of our love, and devotion, must be Jesus Christ, because He alone is worthy of it. Listen again to the Word of God:

"But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does." – James 1:6-8.

When Jesus calls us to be disciples, he calls us to make a lifelong, irrevocable, absolute commitment. Discipleship requires focused attention on the one who bids us to come, the one we choose to follow, and the one we must hear and obey and fix our eyes upon if we are to be found faithful in God's mission.

So, in closing, let me ask you a question: what do you need to do to be completely devoted to Christ? What "boats" is God calling you to burn? What "escape hatches" or "exit doors" do you need to slam shut and padlock? What tangible steps of commitment is God calling you to make today? Will you follow the Lord? Amen.

Let us pray: Friends, we are called to follow Christ with urgency and focus. We preference his word and his life above all others! And so, may we follow him with urgency. May we follow him with focus, for the sake of his Gospel and the sake of his world! Amen!