

Jesus, I will follow You, but...

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I want to read a passage of scripture that comes from Luke, chapter 9, beginning with verse 51. There are two sections of this passage and they seem unrelated, but I'll explain in a moment.

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem, and he sent messengers on ahead. They went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him, but the people there did not welcome him, because he was headed for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them fervently and they went on to another village.

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, let me first 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 one said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye 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."

May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long time ago in a land far away, a beautiful couple joined the church I was serving. They had 11 kids; 10 of their own, one they adopted and, when I met them, they were in the process of adopting two more. A beautiful, wonderful couple, they made a huge impact on our church. And, as you might expect, the children of our church were attracted to that family because they had a kid in every grade. And not only were they attracted to the other children, but they were particularly attracted to the woman. She was a kid magnet. Time passed. They got more and more involved in our congregation. And one day she was in my office saying, "Pastor, I really want to get more involved in the church. What can I do?" And I said, "I've noticed you like kids," (she kind of went, duh,) "and they like you." And I said, "I was really thinking you might help us in the children's department." And she got real quiet and she proceeded to tell me a very tragic story. She had been the director of a daycare at a large congregation in the area. She was there for 15 years. She grew the program from about 20 kids to well over 150 kids, but she came in sharp conflict with the leadership of the church; not with the kids, not with the parents, but with the leadership of the church. And she got burned really, really bad. And she made this statement. She said, "Pastor, I will do anything you want me to do except work with kids." And I said, "In any capacity?" She said, "In any capacity." Her aptitude was definitely with children. Her spiritual gifts were definitely suited for children. But, because of her experience, she would not work with children. I have thought about that conversation through the years and I want to say unequivocally, I place no judgment on her decision. That is a decision between her and God. And I don't have the right to judge on that, but what I know that I know that I know is that if you're in ministry, you're going to get burned. It's going to happen. You're going to get hurt because you're dealing with those darned human beings. And I believe I can say

this with a good bit of confidence, that if I didn't work in a particular area in a church where I got burned, I wouldn't work in any area of the church at this point.

Today, we're going to be talking about our excuses for not serving and our reasons for delaying service. I want you to hold on to that and I want to go back to that passage of scripture that looks like it has nothing to do with this at all, that passage about the Samaritans. Here's what happened. When the Jews went into exile, their law commanded them that they not intermarry with other races. Some of them did. And when the exile was over and they were sent back to Palestine, the people who had married with other races were shunned by those who did not, and they were called Samaritans. And there was a sharp division between the Jews and the Samaritans. And the Samaritans had their own area. Palestine at that time was divided into three areas. You had Galilee in the north, Judea in the south, and in the middle was Samaria. Proper Jews would go around Samaria. They wouldn't even go through Samaria, because the Samaritans took great joy in hassling, hindering, and even hurting Jews that passed through their area on their way to Jerusalem. It actually says a lot about Jesus when we find him in Samaria very often. Not only was he passing through Samaria, but he was seeking hospitality in Samaria. And in this particular situation, Jesus had sent some of his disciples ahead to procure stuff that they needed, and they were rejected. And James and John, in righteous indignation, said, "Jesus, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and destroy these people?" Jesus says, "That's not how we treat people who reject us. We love them, we don't destroy them." Fast-forward to Jesus' ascension into heaven. Before he ascended, he said to his disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." And I can just imagine Peter and John saying to Jesus, "Jesus, we'll follow you, we'll do whatever you want us to do, but don't send us to Samaria."

Who are your Samaritans? What conditions do you put on following Jesus? What might God be calling you to do that you do not want to do? What might God be calling you not to do that you do want to do? You see, Jesus is not concerned about my comfort level or yours. And you'll forgive me if this is a little personal for me, because this is me. I hope this doesn't change your opinion of me, but I am the reluctant pastor. Okay? I'm serious. I am the reluctant pastor. If I had not heard God calling me specifically, I would not be here. My idea of what I wanted to do with my life was to get a degree in biology, then a master's degree in marine biology and a doctorate in macro-marine biology. In other words, I wanted somebody to pay me really well to go fishing. That's what I planned to do but God had other ideas. So, in our passage today, I want to look at those again. The first one is: As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus' response is, "Really? Really? Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but I don't know where I'm going to sleep tonight. Are you willing to be homeless for me? Will you follow me anywhere?" Be careful. Be careful here because this is how I ended up in ministry. Not only is it how I ended up in ministry, this is how I ended up at Central, too. Here's my story. I graduated in 1980, May of 1980. This month, 42 years ago, I was giving my testimony at a youth revival. At the end of my testimony I said, "Whatever God wants me to do, I'll do." I sat down. I was going over what I had said and I got to that place about, "I will do whatever God wants me to do." And it occurred to me that I didn't think that I'd ever actually asked God what He wanted me to do. I had made up my own mind what I was going to do. So, I just kind of flippantly said to God, "What do you want me to do?" And I have never heard the audible voice of God but, as surely as I'm talking to you right now, God said to me, "I

want you to do what he's doing." And I looked up and there was a man preaching. And for the last 42 years, I have been in ministry.

From that moment on, fast-forward. I moved from the Baptist Church to the Methodist Church. There's a lot of reasons for that, mostly theological, but I had some sticking points. One of them was baptism. I worked through that. The other one was the Episcopacy. Now if you don't know what that means, it means that we are governed by a bishop and the bishop says to the ministers of the Conference, "Go there and serve," and then, "Go here and serve." and we are assigned. And I had trouble with the idea of somebody telling me where to go and how long to stay there. I worked through that. I submitted to that. And I have had five appointments, including this one, and they have all been fabulous, including this one. But I'm here because of that vow. When I was moved here, we were right smack dab in the middle of a pandemic. And I said, "Surely I won't be moved during a pandemic." The church I had served, I had been there for 14 years. I only had six years left. I figured they would let me stay there. And then, and if that ain't enough, the church is facing major changes, probably gonna have to move its facility. And what better person to do that than somebody who knew them, knew the community, and had been there for 14 years? And I get a call that says, "Congratulations, you're going to Central!" Here I am! So when you say, "I'll do whatever You want me to do," be careful. Be careful. Jesus is not concerned with your comfort level. But know this: what He calls you to do, He will enable you to do. What He calls you to, He will enable you to do. It may be difficult but, trust me when I tell you, God knows more about what you're capable of than you do.

Second excuse. Jesus said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, let me first 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." Sounds as if Jesus is being pretty curt there, doesn't it? Pretty callous. But the Greek tells us a different story. The man's father was not dead. What he is saying is, "First, let me go and take care of all of my family obligations. And when I'm done with all my family obligations, and it's convenient for me, then I will follow." We start with this when we're really young. Teenagers do it. "But God, I'm just a teenager!" So were Mary and Joseph. "Well, you know, Lord, I just started college." I got called into ministry before I got to college. I was a pastor, a full-time pastor, when I was a junior in college. "But you know I just got married. You can't expect me..." So? "Well, I will do it when the kids are older." "Lord, You don't know what it's like to raise teenagers. You can't expect me to do anything now." "Well, the kids are in college now, Lord, and you know I'm gonna have to work extra to pay for that stuff. That's expensive." "But God, I don't have as much energy now that the kids are out of school. I don't have as much energy as I used to, so when I retire..." "But God, I've got this long bucket list and when things slow down, I will do that." "But God, I've got aging parents now." You know how this story ends. If you don't do it when God calls you to it, the chances of you doing it are slim. Excuses. They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Last but not least: Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hands to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." There are three words that new pastors hate to hear at a new church: "We used to..." Now, knowing the past is important. I have spent the last year studying yours and it has been very enlightening and I understand things better. But if you are stuck in the past, you will die. Being stuck in the past is very painful for the individual or for the church because God doesn't do the

same thing the same way twice. When you're stuck in the past and you're waiting for God to do things like they used to be done, you're going to be sorely disappointed. As Christians, we are ever marching forward and not looking back. We move toward the sunrise, not the sunset. We are people of the resurrection and the empty tomb. We serve a risen Savior, not a dead guy. The message does not change but the conveyance has to. I am a self-proclaimed technological dinosaur by choice. Okay? But I understand that the conveyance of the message must change. I understand that technology is a major, major component of discipleship in the future. I understand that if the Church does not embrace technology and use it for the glory of God, it will die. I understand that. Therefore, I talk about QR codes. I have no idea what it means but I talk about them. That's a little bit of a stretch. But what I'm saying is, it's not about me. It's not about what I'm comfortable with. It's not about what's convenient for me. It's not about what I like. It is not even about what I know. It is about what is best for the kingdom of God and what is best for Central United Protestant Church. And if I will not lead this church into the future, then I need to get the heck out of the way and let somebody else get in here. (By the way, the bishop reappointed me this week.) So, we embrace whatever it is we need to embrace to advance the kingdom of God, to proclaim the gospel, and what benefits this congregation.

What would you do for the kingdom of God? You say you love Jesus. We just sang, "O how I love Jesus." In Matthew's gospel, he chooses to start his account of Jesus' life with the Sermon on the Mount. And the Sermon on the Mount is the longest uninterrupted passage we have of Jesus speaking. He begins that with the Beatitudes. God willing and the creek don't rise, I will one day preach a series of sermons on the Beatitudes. One of them is, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled." And some of you just looked at your watch. You're wondering if you're going to get a second sermon. The answer is no. I want to give you a snippet, though. Here's what the Greek says there. The Greek says, "O the bliss, O the blessedness of those who are starving to death for righteousness. O the bliss, O the blessedness of those who are dying of thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Jesus said, "Righteousness is your birthright. You can have it." He's actually asking a question in that. He's asking, "How bad do you want it? How bad do you want it? You can have it. How bad do you want it?" Do you want it bad enough to pay the price to do what He wants you to do? Do you want it bad enough to let go of your excuses? Do you want it bad enough to let go of the past? Do you want it bad enough to let go of what you want to do and embrace what you don't want to do because that's what God wants you to do? Do you want it bad enough to do what God wants you to do? Jesus is posing the question to you. How bad do you want it? Now, some of the things that God is dealing with you about are personal in nature. They're about your personal growth as a Christian. You've been putting it off and putting it off and making excuses and God said, "No. This morning is your morning. Let go of it." Some of those are excuses about service. You know that you know that you know that God wants you to do something. He's put it on your heart before and you've made any number of reasons why you can't and Jesus is saying to us, "Let it go. Let it go." Today, how bad do you want it?

Let's pray. So, in this quiet, I want you to give whatever it is, personally or service-wise, by saying, "I will do whatever You want me to do."

Lord, we are very accomplished at making excuses. Help us to become as accomplished at following You. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.