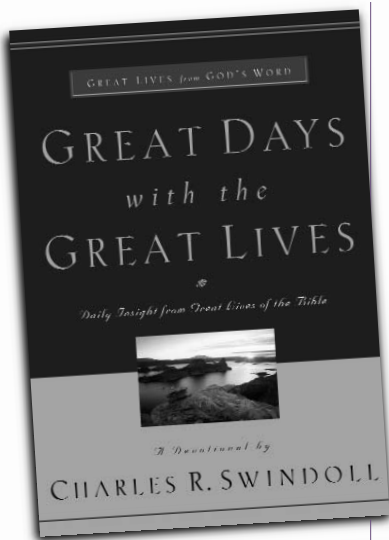


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Following Christ with a Whole Heart

by Mark Bailey

Mark Bailey

Dr. Mark Bailey's love for Dallas Theological Seminary began when he was a student. He went on to become professor of Bible Exposition, vice president for academic affairs, academic dean, and provost before he accepted his role as the Seminary's fifth president.

He earned his bachelor's degree from Southwestern College in Phoenix, two master's degrees from Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, and his doctorate from Dallas Seminary. He has authored *To Follow Him: The Seven Marks of a Disciple* (Multnomah, 1997) and coauthored *The New Testament Explorer* (Word, 1999).

Theological education and pastoral ministry have been Dr. Bailey's career passions. While teaching and holding administrative roles at Dallas Seminary, he was also the senior pastor at Faith Bible Church in DeSoto, Texas, from 1995 to 2001.

Dr. Bailey has guided tours to Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and Rome and has served in missions in Argentina, Venezuela, and Hungary. He and his wife, Barbara, have two sons: Joshua, who is married to Emily, and Jeremy. They also have a new granddaughter, Fiona Maeve.



This message could be subtitled, "Frustrations to Following Christ," because this is a bottom-line issue that Jesus addressed with His disciples as they prepared for His departure.

I want to be the kind of disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ who follows Him with my whole heart, holding nothing back. And because I trust and believe that this is also the desire of your heart, let me share some thoughts with you from Luke 9:51–62—a very challenging account from the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Importance of Following Jesus

Many scholars believe that Luke 9, and in particular the text we are considering, forms a dramatic turning point in the story of Jesus' earthly ministry. According to verse

(continued on next page)

51, when “the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” From this point on, He would head straight for Jerusalem and what He knew awaited Him there, which was His death on the cross, His resurrection, and His departure back to the Father.

As we read Luke 9 and the following chapters through to Luke 19 when Jesus actually entered Jerusalem, we discover a section of Scripture filled with His teachings to His disciples while He was on the road between Galilee and Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, these teachings focus on the importance and the cost of following Jesus, because those who followed Him all the way without quitting or turning back were also going to wind up in Jerusalem and face the reality of Jesus’ arrest, trials, and crucifixion.

The fact that Jesus “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” meant that He was all business about the business of discipleship. We also see in this section that He was now turning to the Gentiles, not only because Israel had rejected Him but also because Jesus had a much broader mission that reached beyond Israel to the world.

Who Will Follow Jesus, and How Will They Follow?

Not everyone wanted to follow Jesus, however, so immediately in Luke 9:52–53 we read about His rejection by the people of a Samaritan village. Just prior to this incident, Jesus had told the crowd following Him, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Most of the people around Jesus didn’t understand at this point that He was going to Jerusalem to be crucified. But they knew what a Roman cross meant: a most excruciating death.

So with that imagery lingering in people’s minds, Jesus set out for Jerusalem. And as He met people along the way and taught the disciples, the question became *who* would follow Him and also *how* they would follow Him. It is in this setting that we meet three would-be followers of Jesus in Luke 9:57–62.

This section explains my subtitle to this message, “Frustrations to Following Christ.” I call these frustrations not because following Jesus is frustrating. On the contrary, I’m using the word “frustration” to refer to those excuses that prevented these three potential

disciples from following Christ with their whole hearts.

Before we meet these individuals, allow me to pause and ask you some questions that all of Christ’s followers need to ask themselves regularly. What are the frustrations that might cause you to turn aside from being a fully devoted follower of the Savior? Will you have the Great Commandment to love God and others as yourselves as your abiding motivation, and will you have the Great Commission to take the gospel into all the world as your all-consuming mission?

As you contemplate these questions and formulate your answers, let’s meet three men, and examine what about them frustrated a wholehearted commitment to follow Jesus.

Many have written about these men, and even more have preached about them. For this article I am adopting three “names” that one of my favorite mentors used when he taught this passage. To Dr. Stanley A. Ellisen I owe so much for igniting my passions for discipleship.

Meet Mr. Too-Hasty

The first man was actually a volunteer. “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’ ” (Luke 9:57–58).

Let’s call this man “Mr. Too-Hasty.” He was too hasty with his commitment, which he made on his own. But Jesus “dropped the other shoe,” so to speak, and replied that following Him meant no guarantee of “creature comforts” such as soft beds and hot showers every night.

We can infer that this was the man’s interest by the nature of Jesus’ answer as He knew his heart and mind. This man was only interested in going with Jesus if he could stay at the Hyatt. Mr. Too-Hasty was saying, “Lord, I’ll be glad to be Your disciple. But can I see the accommodation and amenity list first?”

This would-be disciple’s response to Jesus’ challenge is not stated in our text. In fact, this is the case with each of the three

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incidents recorded in Luke 9:57–62. I believe this is for a reason. The critical issue for you and me as Jesus’ followers today is not what these men did about Jesus’ call, but what we are going to do. Jesus is asking us to identify and correct whatever issue or attitude may be keeping us from following Him unreservedly.

One thing these men learned very clearly from their encounters with Jesus is that whatever was going to happen to Him might happen to them. Jesus was on His way to the cross, and the real question behind His words is, “Can you follow Me to the cross?”

The core requirement here is *identification* with Christ. Are we willing to get past the frustration of what others think of us, where we might stay, what the salary level might be, or anything else and say, “Wherever Jesus leads we will go”? Mr. Too-Hasty failed to count the cost of following Jesus.

Meet Mr. Too-Hesitant

The second reluctant disciple Jesus met on His resolute way to Jerusalem is a man we will call

“Mr. Too-Hesitant.” We read, “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’ ” (Luke 9:59–60).

The first man was a volunteer, but this guy was a recruit. Now I don’t know about you, but his

request sounds reasonable to me, especially given the fact that Jesus made the first move. It’s as if this man was saying, “Lord, I realize I may not have a place to sleep if I follow You, and I’m OK with that. But are You telling me that I can’t even attend my father’s funeral?”

This is a fascinating scene because the proper burial of a family member was very important in Jewish tradition. So important, in fact, that the Talmud said a person who had this responsibility was relieved of his obligation to pray or even obey the commands of the *Torah* until the burial was complete.

Thus, the task of burying his father was the most important thing in this man’s life—as far as he was concerned. That’s why he

was no doubt startled by Jesus’ answer. This man was all caught up in the cares and the responsibilities of this life, and I think what Jesus was telling him was similar to what He said to the crowd later in Luke: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Jesus was saying that following Him in the proclamation of the gospel supersedes all other obligations, relationships, and traditions, even those that seem most important to us here on earth.

Much of the speculation about this part of the story centers on whether this man’s father was already dead or whether he wanted to wait around to receive his portion of the inheritance. But I believe those aren’t the most relevant issues. The message Jesus conveyed is that our highest priority is absolute obedience to Him.

If the first frustration or hurdle to following Jesus is the issue of our comfort, the second is the issue of our earthly cares. By Jesus’ drastic statement “Let the dead bury their own dead,” He is telling us that the mission is not changed because we have

other obligations. We are still to take the gospel to people in all nations, even to the uttermost part of the earth.

Meet Mr. Too-Homesick

The third character Jesus encountered was a mixture of the first two. He volunteered like the first man, but he also drew back and made conditions like the second one. “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 9:61–62).

This fellow was saying, “All right, Jesus, I understand the residency and responsibility parts. But are You telling me that I can’t even kiss my loved ones good-bye before I leave?” We will call him “Mr. Too-Homesick.”

Did you know that Jesus never told us to choose Him over the devil? But He did tell us to choose Him over family. Now we know that in the rest of the New Testament God doesn’t excuse us from caring for our families. But if your family comes before the Lord and your commitment to Him, then you have a misplaced priority system.

JESUS IS ASKING US TO IDENTIFY AND CORRECT WHATEVER ISSUE OR ATTITUDE MAY BE KEEPING US FROM FOLLOWING HIM UNRESERVEDLY.

The problem with this third man was not that he loved his family. The issue was one of loyalty to Jesus. The Lord's famous statement about the person who looks back after deciding to follow Him speaks of distraction and preoccupation with what was left behind.

The wording of this passage is an allusion to Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21). Elijah had just killed all the prophets of Baal at the base of Mount Carmel, and then he ran from Jezebel all the way to Mount Horeb.

But Elijah left there and found Elisha plowing with 12 pair of oxen. Elijah went up to Elisha and threw his mantle over him. Elisha wanted to follow Elijah, but he said, "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye." Interestingly, Elijah allowed Elisha to go. He must have known that Elisha would come back, which he did.

Jesus Wants to 'Rattle Our Cages'

Jesus, however, did not give the man who approached Him that option—no doubt because He knew that the man would get homesick if he went back and

would never return. This may be the most radical of the three rebuking responses Jesus made. These are simple but profound illustrations of the importance and the cost of discipleship. Jesus used them as radical ways to "rattle our cages"—to jar us a bit or a lot to help us understand the seriousness both of His calling as well as a warning not to allow any frustration to sidetrack us from being the faithful followers of Jesus.

If I may suggest three applicational thoughts from these accounts, they would be these. First, a disciple of Jesus Christ must be prepared for hardship, even rejection.

Following Christ is no easy feat. Second, obedience must not be delayed for any reason. It is incongruent for a follower of Christ to say "Lord," and then say "No." That is an oxymoron. Third, the kingdom of God is to be the disciple's highest priority. No one who has taken hold of the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom.

Seek first and foremost the kingdom of God—and don't look back!

SEEK FIRST AND FOREMOST THE KINGDOM OF GOD—AND DON'T LOOK BACK!

Following Jesus wherever He leads

My grandfather raised sheep in San Lewis Valley in Colorado. When I was young, our family would drive five hours across the mountains from Glenwood Springs for a visit to my grandfather's place outside of Monte Vista. I would ask Dad to let me out of the car before we arrived at the farmhouse so I could run out into the field where my grandfather was working.

I used to climb up on that old tractor and sit between granddad's knees, taking hold of the steering sticks of that small Caterpillar tractor as if I were controlling what seemed to me like a huge piece of machinery. Of course, my grandfather's hands were firmly on the controls.

Often I would watch my granddad as he drove his tractor. He would stare straight ahead, not looking beside or behind him. One time I asked him, "Granddad, what are you looking at?"

"Do you see that fence post ahead of us . . . in the next field over?" he asked me. "I'm staring at that post so I can plow a straight furrow. And when I get to the end of the field, I'm going to turn around and go straight toward the other post at the other end."

I recalled that lesson as I presented this message on Luke 9 to the Seminary family in my annual fall chapel address. To accomplish anything of lasting value in the "harvest fields" of God's kingdom, we need to look ahead and keep our eyes on Jesus.

This is Dallas Seminary's commitment, and your prayers and financial support are the bedrock beneath us! I appreciate you deeply, and I want to be an encouragement to you. This is why you will find a brief survey attached to the enclosed reply slip.

Please take a minute to answer the questions and help us minister to you more effectively and be good stewards of our resources. Thank you for this valuable feedback!



DR. MARK L. BAILEY
President
Dallas Theological Seminary

