

Sermon on

Luke 9:57-62

HIW 15 March 2009

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

We live in the 21st century, a time when plan and priority play a great role in the world of work. Many people make many plans and are confused to implement them because of a lack of priority and commitment. One needs to be selective. One needs to sit down and make priorities and make decision of commitment. Success comes only when there is priority accompanied by commitment.

In the Bible text for today's sermon we read that Jesus confronts three different people who wanted to follow him but have something wrong with their commitments. He challenges them to make priorities, calculate all the costs of discipleship, and make a decision of commitment.

The first of these appears to be volunteering unconditionally. The second appears to have an emergency, which will delay his commitment for the time being. The third volunteer seems ready to follow Jesus immediately, but just wants to say good-bye to his family.

In each case, the commitment to follow Jesus seems sincere, and the level of commitment looks acceptable to the reader. Each of us may be tempted to approve the applications of each of the three men today. But Jesus did not approve and may not approve even today. When we read this story, it looks to us as though Jesus does not want volunteers at all. It seems that He is trying to drive people off, rather than to "attract" followers.

What is wrong with the commitment of these three volunteers?

Why is Jesus so discouraging to these volunteers?

What kind of Discipleship does Jesus require?

The responses of our Lord Jesus Christ to all volunteers are instructive concerning Christian Discipleship.

I want to look at each volunteer's commitment to follow Jesus and the responses of Jesus to each offer. Then we may learn something which may help us to understand the text.

Two things can be observed from the commitments of these three men. The first is **Unlimited Commitment** and the second is **Delayed Commitment (9, 57-58)**.

1. Unlimited Commitment

The first volunteer says to Jesus "I will follow you wherever you go". This seems to be unlimited commitment. What is wrong with this then? How could Jesus hope for a better disciple than this? Our Lord Jesus is not satisfied with this offer and responds by saying ***"the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"***.

Jesus saw what others could not see. The Bible says that human beings see outward appearance but the Lord looks upon the heart (Samuel 16:7).

Towards the end of 1989 we had an incident in my church in Dembi Dollo in Ethiopia. One radical communist cadre came to our Church with his family and said "I will be a Christian and serve you". Our Pastors were filled with joy. After a few months they called him to be one of the elders without election.

After some time the cadre started to do the job he knew in the communist party. He used all methods of divide and rule. He used pastors to attack the active young Committed Christians. The Elders and pastors excommunicated many young active committed Christians.

After the political change in 1991 many communists infiltrated the Church with hidden motives. They came to the church they were burning and destroying in order to gain the leadership positions which they had lost in politics. Our Church leaders could not see these hidden motives. I do not have a problem in accepting them as church members, but accepting them as church leaders was wrong.

Following Jesus does not mean always having a good position, but paying prices. I wonder whether the first volunteer knew the cost of discipleship.

Following Jesus is similar to joining the army. Joining the army does not always make you happy. It requires accepting ups and downs. It requires risking luxury even risking one's life. This man said he would follow Jesus wherever He goes, without calculating the costs of Discipleship.

Jesus will now put this man's commitment to the test. Jesus says to him in effect, ***the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Mann has nowhere to lay His head. You say you will follow me anywhere. I do not own even a place that I call 'home'. I do not even have my own bed. Are you willing to follow me under this condition?***

This man might have seen Jesus walking with many people to the beach. He might have seen Jesus feeding people in the desert. It is not bad to go with such a popular man and enjoy the retreat.

But Jesus' focus was different. His focus is on what one is willing to leave behind in order to follow Him. Following Jesus is not going to Mallorca in the winter and coming back to one's home in Germany for the summer. It requires leaving home for ever.

Jesus is saying to this man 'you do not really understand what you are saying. In order to follow me you must really leave everything behind.' Jesus is saying: ***"following me requires that you imitate me in every aspect of my life and ministry"***.

Our Bible does not say anything about the response of the first volunteer to Jesus or whether he became a true Disciple of Jesus. Our impression is that he shook his head and went away.

2. Delayed Commitment (9, 59-62)

The second and the third volunteers have something in common. Both seem to be committed, but not now. There is a common word that both said **"First"**: **"First let me(v.59) do this and that.**

None of them said anything about not following Jesus Christ. What they are talking about is following Christ after accomplishing their other duties. Thus one can say the commitment of the second and third volunteers is delayed commitment.

The second volunteer's excuse seems to be perfect. The death of a relative is enough reason to be absent from work even in our time. May be this man is the first-born son who has an obligation to go and bury his father. Jesus could have said to this man "I understand that it is difficult for you, so just do what you have got to do. Bury your father. It may take you 24 hours, put your affairs in order and then come and join us." However, what Jesus says is shocking: "Let the dead bury their dead, but you follow me. "

Why did Jesus say this? Is he against fulfilling family obligations? I believe Jesus sees what we cannot see.

A funeral and its rites can take months and years in some cultures. Then there is a possibility that some people in the family may ask the oldest son to take over the duties of his late father. All these could be a hindrance to follow Jesus.

Another thought could be that Jesus is speaking about life and death. Digging a grave could be a symbol of death and following Jesus is a symbol of life.

If one must choose between digging a grave and being a disciple of Jesus', it is important to be a disciple. Discipleship is proclaiming the good news of eternity. Proclaiming the life everlasting – that takes priority over burying the dead.

Jesus is talking about having priorities. He is saying that those who follow Him – must be those who put Him first, above all things.

It is true that we demonstrate our love to God by loving our fellow men. But we must never love men above God. Jesus is talking here about the priority of our love and commitment to Him over the love and affection we have for our families. He is not against loving one's family, but He is against all sorts of excuses not to follow Him. The family is the means by which we may serve God, but it is not the only means.

Following Christ means putting everything aside which hinders our commitment to Him.

Following Jesus does not mean throwing our marriages and children away.

Some people in Ethiopia travel from place to place in the name of preaching the Gospel, ignoring their families and farms. I asked some of these people why they leave their homes, families and farms and travel every workday. They said they are called to preach the Gospel and that is their only duty. If they did other jobs, they would be punished. I told them that they misunderstood the duty of discipleship, however, they did not accept.

One cannot use ministry as an excuse for not serving the family.

In Europe also there is the so-called modern way of ignoring one's duty to serve one's family. Some people sacrifice their family for the sake of a self-serving ministry to gain success and status.

Using religion or success as an excuse for ignoring one's family is wrong. Jesus condemned the Pharisees who used Religious commitment as a pretext for not meeting the needs of their elderly parents (Mk7:11). They say my money is **Corban** which means devoted to God. They used religious commitment as an excuse for ignoring and neglecting their families.

Following Christ does not mean also neglecting our other duties which we perform here on earth.

We all have responsibilities to fulfill as a spouse, as a parent, as a son or daughter; we have responsibilities at our place of work and in our homes. We have a responsibility in our Community, in our country and in our Church. We can be everywhere and be the followers of Jesus. The Same Lord who calls on us to fulfill all our earthly responsibilities commands us, saying "seek first God's Kingdom" (Mt 6:33). **The Kingdom of God should be our first priority.**

Let us come to the last volunteer who wanted to follow Jesus and asked him **"I will follow you Lord, but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home."**

Jesus rejected his request, saying to him 'No one, after putting his hand to plough and looks back, is fit for the Kingdom of God' (v. 61, 62).

Is this a reasonable request? Yes, it is. It is good for the family who is remaining behind to know where their son is going.

There is a similar, almost parallel text in the Bible in 1Kings 19: (19-21). We may remember the story of the request of Elisha to Elijah. Elisha said he would follow Elijah after saying good-bye to his parents. Contrary to Jesus' response Elijah allowed Elisha to say good-bye. Jesus treats such request as a sign that the man is unfit for the Kingdom of God. Why did Jesus answers contrary to Elijah?

I think Jesus is asserting His authority over respected Old Testament figures. Jesus is referring to what He had previously told the Pharisees saying **"something greater than Jonah is here"** (Mt. 12:41), and **"something greater than Solomon is here"** (Mt. 12:42).

I think by employing the illustration of "Plough" in a context Jesus rejected the request in order to teach them that **'Something greater than Elijah is here'**.

Dear brothers and sisters!

Jesus is calling us every Sunday through the church bell saying something greater than your walk in the Eilenriede-forest is here, take time to listen and worship God, only for an hour. He is saying: "Yes, I know that there are many attractive activities in the city of Hannover, but I am greater than your Sunday activities."

Christ is not some historical figure who only lived once upon a time. No - He is our Living, ever present, Lord and He is calling us to follow Him.

It is time to take hold of the plough. It is time to put the Kingdom of God and His business ahead of our worldly business. Following Christ could mean going on a difficult road, but it is the right road that leads to life. It is the right way of having a true joy in our lives. Following Jesus may require us to pay a price, but it is worth it. Following Christ is not an easy decision, but it is the right decision. Amen!

Let me sing a chorus in Amharic which we sung in jail when we were persecuted by the communist government of Ethiopia in 1983. While we were in jail we comforted each other with this song.

The Song is in Amharic and I tried to translate it as follows.

Christianity requires price

This is only beginning

I need to pay more

I read the history of our fathers

I drink from the cups of the Prophets

I drink from the cups of the Apostles

That is the price I need to pay

Before I receive my reward

Waagaa Yaskaflilalinna Kirstinna

Genaa minuu tayaazennaa

Ye aabbaatochen wag Ayiche

Ye nabiyaat inna ye hawaariyatin Tsiwwaa xaxiche

Shillimaaten iqabelalehu

Genaa Waagaa ikafalehu

Shillimaateen I qabelaalehu

Genaa Waagaa ikafalaalehu