

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL COMMITMENT
(Matthew 8:19-22; Luke 9:57-62)
2.6.22

INTRODUCTION

One of the things I love about the Bible is its honesty. If something is great, it says it's great; if something is terrible, it says so. It shows human behavior in all its wide-ranging, often embarrassing, ways. One of the things that gets the Bible's honesty treatment is excuses.

Now the dictionary defines an "excuse" as: *a reason or explanation put forward to defend or justify a fault or offense*. Now there are a couple of different kinds of excuses. The first kind is where somebody did wrong but doesn't want to own up to it. Adam and Eve, the first two people, and the first two sinners, gave us a wonderful performance of that kind of excuse in Genesis 3. When God asked Adam if he had eaten the forbidden fruit, he said, "The woman you gave me shared some fruit, so I ate it." Not my fault, God; it was her fault and, actually, kind of Your fault for giving me such a person. When God asked Eve, she said, "The serpent who was here in the garden, he tricked me." Not my fault, God; it was him. All kinds of justification, just no responsibility.

Now the other kind of excuse we find in the Bible is where God presents a job or an opportunity, but the person he presents it to doesn't want any part of it, so they present all kinds of responses in an attempt to deflect the whole idea. Moses gave us a great picture of what that kind of excuse looks like in Exodus 3-4. At the burning bush, God told Moses, "I have heard the cries and suffering of my people, so I want you to bring them out from Pharaoh in Egypt." And Moses' first response? "I ain't a big enough person for that." Then God said, "Don't worry; I'll be with you." Then Moses started probing God with some questions: "Who should I say told me to do this? What if they don't believe me?" When God had answered those questions, Moses came back with, "I can't do this, Lord; I'm a lousy speaker." When God answered that objection, Moses at last showed his true heart: "Lord, send somebody else, anybody else." Moses was absolutely not interested, no matter what God said, until God finally promised to send Moses' brother Aaron to come alongside him and speak for him. Then, finally, Moses relented.

Our story today is about three guys who saw or were presented with an opportunity to follow Jesus Christ but instead responded with excuses for why they couldn't do that. When their opportunity came face to face with reality, with counting the cost, they pulled out an excuse as to why they couldn't proceed further — even though, in their own minds, they thought they'd really like to. But before we begin, **let's bow in prayer to our Master.**

TEXTS

[A] teacher of the law came to Him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head” — Matthew 8:19-20.

Now the first person having interaction with Jesus is a “teacher of the law,” a scribe. This would have been a person who already had some status in that world, having both education and some position. Now we know that, when Christ first came on the scene, a good number of the religious leaders studied Him; we know this because of Nicodemus’ comment when He met with Jesus: **“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs You are doing if God were not with Him” — Nicodemus, John 3:2.** He easily could have been one of those to whom Nicodemus was referring, becoming convinced that there just might be something special about this Jesus of Nazareth. But, regardless of motivations, he decided to gauge Christ’s interest in having him join His team. And he presents himself with a pretty much unconditional, “no limits” way: “I will follow you wherever You go.” Pretty impressive. Maybe.

But Jesus wants to evaluate both the depth and the reality of his commitment, so He does this by sharing a very simple truth: **“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 8:20.** In other words, “The creatures of nature all have some place to rest themselves, but I Myself have sometimes had no such place. It’s happened before and it might happen again.” This is not to say that Jesus was at that moment either penniless or homeless, but that being in constant travel all over the country as a result of the demands of God’s ministry has sometimes put Him in a place that had featured no roof over His head — or other, unspoken hardships.

Is this guy still just as eager to make such an unqualified commitment to Jesus? Apparently not, because we never hear another word from him or about him. Whether he left Jesus like the rich young ruler — **At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad — Mark 10:22a** — he nevertheless left the promise of his initial words in the dust.

Next up is a guy to whom Christ initiated the conversation: **He said to another man, “Follow Me” — Luke 9:59a.** Don’t you sometimes wonder what it was about this man that made Jesus extend him such an amazing invitation? Well, we can probably assume some level of desire on the part of this guy to following Jesus as Matthew already identified him as a “disciple.” But we also get a picture of a man not sure whether he can completely give Jesus a firm answer. I mean, think about it: On the one hand, he is ID’d as a “disciple,” and yet Jesus has to specifically invite him to **“Follow Me.”** So, what’s going on?

We find out in his response to Christ's invitation; *he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father"* — *Luke 9:59b*. Now to really understand his request and Christ's response, we need to grasp the context of that statement within the culture of the time, taking a look at their burial practices. People back then often practiced what we might call a "two-stage burial." Shortly after death (which is apparently the case here), the deceased would have had their body buried in a cave. After one year had elapsed, the second stage would take place; the family would return to the cave to collect the bones of the deceased and place them with those of his dead ancestors in much-smaller receptacle called an "ossuary" — a bone box. It is possible that this guy is asking Jesus to wait an entire year for him, so he could attend to this family obligation; at that time, according to him anyway, he'd be good to go. But Christ wasn't impressed.

But Jesus told him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead . . . but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" — *Matthew 8:22; Luke 9:60b*.

There are one of two possible meanings here in Christ's words, "Let the dead bury their own dead." One possibility is that Jesus is telling this guy to let those spiritually dead look after taking care of the physically dead. And a second possibility is to let the dead, the ancestors already dead, bury, or receive, their own dead, meaning the one who has so recently died.

But regardless of that, the overriding message from Jesus to this guy is one of urgency: "You go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Jesus is basically saying, "I have something far more urgent to deal with than funeral schedules. Let others worry about that; I have something far more pressing for you to do — to go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Jesus is not insulting this man's loss nor any family obligations. But what He is doing is declaring the urgency of ministering to the living versus the dead. The dead are already in their eternity; that makes the living the priority.

And then there was one more: *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 a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God"* — *Luke 9:61-62*. In our day and age, we often hear about something called "distracted drivers," meaning drivers who, instead of keeping their eyes on the road, let themselves get distracted by friends or text messages or any of a number of things, often resulting in tragic, even fatal, consequences — like to the tune of some 3,000 fatalities per year along with some 280,000 injuries. Somebody in those cars is trying to drive with a divided mind — which never works well.

Now of course, in this guy's future-tense mind — note the words, "I will follow you" — there is no problem. But Jesus sees it different. This guy is a distracted disciple. Even if his body is with Jesus, his heart and mind are someplace else — meaning that Christ's mission never has this guy's complete submission. Now obviously Jesus is not against

family; he invented family. He gives us family, and that's the whole point: Family, like all else in our lives, is a gift, a gift of God's love and grace. Family didn't originate with us, so it's not ours to either claim or prioritize as we wish. Neither is time ours. That too is a gift from the gracious heart of God. But this guy didn't get that memo; he's trying to customize Christ's priorities with his own, meaning that Jesus gets the leftovers of this man's affections — so the picture Christ chooses to create in response is very clear. Essentially Jesus is asking this guy: "So you mean to tell me that you can go into a field and plow a straight furrow — even though you are looking backwards the whole time? Is that what you're saying? Well, this is what I'm saying: No way!" Jesus has no interest in "hiring" somebody who can't give his entire attention to Christ's ministry.

APPLICATION

World history has given us many "groups of three," a collection of threes who have become known together. Biblical tradition gave us the three wise men. Literature gave us "the three musketeers." Fairy tales gave us three little pigs. I'm not sure exactly what gave us the Three Stooges (actually vaudeville did).

Likewise, our story today gives us another group of three — not exactly wonderful but at least memorable. All three of these guys show faults that turned out to be far, far bigger than their commitment to Jesus. And here they are:

The first guy looked at Jesus and said, "Ooh, that's too expensive!" He failed to count the costs of what following Christ might mean. Now Jesus had always made that clear, that following in His steps could demand more of our lives than we ever imagined; in fact, it is an incredibly naïve person who thinks they can have a discipleship that costs them nothing. Consider these verses:

- 1) ***"Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will save it" — Jesus Christ, Luke 9:23-24.***
- 2) ***"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" — Jesus Christ, Mark 8:36.***

When this guy realized the cost, he very literally disappeared into history. But one day him and his accounting will resurface — at the final judgment. It may well be that, during that final interview, God may share the words that the apostle Paul shared with the Philippian church: ***"[W]hatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know***

Christ — Paul, Philippians 3:7-10a. And then, whoever this guy was, he will disappear again — into the eternal judgment of hell.

Now the second guy looked at Jesus and said, “Ooh, that’s too quick!” He felt he needed to give time to something else first — specifically, the burial of his father, before he could commit to discipleship. He turned down Christ because he wanted to be the master of his timeframes. As with the first guy, he disappeared into history, never — as far as we know — resurfacing at Christ’s side again. But he will reappear one more time; as with the first guy, he will appear before the throne of God to make his case, to explain his life, his priorities, and the use of the time that God gave him. In that moment, he may hear these words from God Almighty, quoting from his own beloved Son: **“As long as it is day, we must do the works of Him who sent He. Night is coming, when no one can work” — Jesus Christ, John 9:4.** Or maybe these words from Jesus will be shared: **“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” — Jesus Christ, John 4:35b.** And then, as with the first guy, this one too will disappear — into the eternal judgment of hell.

And then there’s the third guy. Now he looked at Jesus and said: “Ooh, that’s too demanding!” He had other loves, other affections, other priorities, which he felt demanded his time first. Now eventually, or so he thought, he would get back to Jesus as soon as he allowed others to have their time first. Jesus just seemed way too anxious and far too demanding to suit him. And, like the others, he too disappeared into history. But also like the others, he will reappear one more time before the throne of God to explain himself, how his affections for others were of more consideration than his affections for Christ. In that moment, he may hear these words from God Almighty, quoting from His own beloved Son: **“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:37.** Or maybe these words from Jesus will be shared: **“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:33 (NKJV).** And then maybe, just maybe, God will share with all three guys a verse that spans both testaments in His final thought to them: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” — Jesus Christ, Mark 12:30 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5).** And then, as with the other two guys, this one too will disappear — into the eternal judgment of hell. Oh, what a difference they might have realized if they had simply realized Jesus first.

CONCLUSION

As I close this morning, I’d like to share a prayer from the early part of the 16th century that expresses so well what I think these passages are trying to share: *Teach me to serve as You deserve: to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to labor and not to seek to rest, to give of myself and not to ask for a reward — except*

for the reward of knowing that I am doing Your will — St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

“Doing Your will.” That’s the deal. Are we as a church, as a body of believers, so sold out on Jesus Christ that we will let nothing stand in the way of doing His will? That’s a mark of a truly living church, a church taking in only the blessed breaths of God’s Holy Spirit — counting nothing of more importance than the simple lifestyle of doing God’s will. Is that us? Let’s pray!