

Rejection Road
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Peter 2:1-10, Luke 9:51-62

Our third Scripture reading comes from Luke 9:51-62. Listen now to God's Word. "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went 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, 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."

This weekend is a time of celebration. On the surface, the 4th of July is a day about barbeques and fireworks and watermelon and kids in sprinklers. But becoming a nation took an amazing sacrifice. In 1776, the United States was a dream not yet fully realized, one that took an eight year war and over 45,000 deaths between the American and British troops. There was no looking back. As the Declaration of Independence said, "we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." Since that time, hundreds of thousands of men and women have served to protect our country, many giving their lives so that we might be able to live in freedom today, and we have honored their dedication and sacrifice.

Now I'm not one to make a point of each holiday that comes along in my sermons, but the passage we read today from Luke makes a lot of sense as we compare the two. Just as the freedom we have in our nation has come at great cost, so too is the cost of discipleship. While following Jesus has rewards far beyond our imagination, He calls us to follow Him without reservation. He rejects anything less, and He Himself is rejected along the way. And as we study this passage, we can learn why we're called to be totally sold out to Jesus.

To get to the heart of what Luke is talking about, we need to know something about an ancient biblical figure. That's Elijah. Elijah was known as Israel's greatest prophet. He was known for confronting wicked kings and having called down fire from heaven that destroyed two garrisons of men. He also was remembered because he did not die; instead, he was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. When people thought Jesus, they immediately thought of Elijah too.

As Luke starts this passage, he describes Jesus getting ready to go to Jerusalem to be "taken up" to heaven. Now Luke isn't giving us a travelogue; Jesus travels all sorts of places before actually reaching Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus is starting a new phase in His ministry. People know who He is now, and while He's still going to teach and preach and heal as He travels, His primary purpose is to set the stage for His death on the cross.

But the language that Jesus was using about being “taken up” would have immediately made the people of His day think of Elijah taken up in the whirlwind. Moreover, the passage says that Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. The language in the original Greek says that he “set his face towards Jerusalem.” This was an ancient phrase found many times in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Each time Ezekiel was called on by God to set his face towards something, he was supposed to prophesy against it and tell it of upcoming disaster. So the disciples are getting overexcited. *Finally*, Jesus is going to become the conqueror we knew God was going to send us! That’s what the disciples are thinking, and they’re ready for some fire and brimstone.

They find their perfect target in a Samaritan village. Now the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans was huge. The Samaritans were the remnants of the ancient portion of Israel that was unfaithful to God and was exiled from the land in 722BC. Those who came back from exile intermarried with the locals and developed their own version of the Scriptures. They worshipped on Mount Gerazim rather than in Jerusalem. The Jews saw the Samaritans as half-breeds and heretics, and the Samaritans deeply resented the Jews. There was no love lost here! Now Samaria sits in-between the northern and southern parts of Israel. It’s kind of like the lake that separates us from the UP. The most direct route to Jerusalem from northern Israel was through Samaria, but people spent days traveling around Samaria to avoid it. But Jesus, wanting to spread God’s message everywhere, plans to go straight through. By this time, word about Jesus has spread as far as Gentile lands, so surely the Samaritans knew about Him. We don’t know why the Samaritan village rejects Jesus, but it’s probably due to their own dislike of the Jews and a Jewish prophet that they think has come to badmouth them. Either way, they don’t want to hear whatever truth He might be able to teach them.

So John and James get into this whole righteous indignation bit. They’re like, “We’ll show them who’s boss!” They’re all ready to call down fire from heaven. They are thinking that Jesus is like the new Elijah, bringing some holy wrath to the unbelievers. Now Jesus has never talked about doing anything like this. The disciples still don’t get it! Rejection is a part of proclaiming the truth. But James and John are ready to condemn these folks right here and now. And Jesus turns around and rebukes them. His whole purpose in coming to Earth is not wrath but a divine rescue mission. It’s summed up in John 3:16-17, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Jesus is setting aside judgment for now. Judgment *will* come at a later date and time, once the good news of salvation has been proclaimed throughout the world and when people have the chance to respond or reject it. We live in the era of grace, where we can accept God’s free gift of salvation. Judgment will come, but only at God’s hand, in His time, and in His perfect justice.

So the group is on the road heading to another village where they might be welcomed. A man comes along and says to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” It sounds like an awesome statement. Jesus, where you lead, I will go, no matter what mountain, no matter what valley, I’m going there too. It sounds like some of the songs we sing, doesn’t it? I don’t doubt that he believed that’s what he wanted to do. Jesus doesn’t rebuke the man directly or tell him he can’t come along, but he says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Which makes us think, huh?

What is Jesus trying to say? I think Jesus is giving him a warning. Jesus is saying, “Do you really have any clue what you’re getting into here?” Jesus’ words often upset people; He was no ordinary teacher. It meant that Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles alike didn’t always open their homes to Him. Jesus knew the road ahead of Him and knew how far the rejection would go, even to be crucified as an enemy of Israel. This man’s heart was in the right place, but Jesus challenged him. When there’s no food on the table, when there’s no place to sleep, when your clothes are wearing out and people despise you because you stand for the truth, how easy will it be to say, “I will follow you wherever you go”? Jesus wants this kind of disciple. He wants you and me to be this kind of disciple. But He wants us to count the cost. Following Jesus faithfully is going to require all we have, and Jesus puts that up front.

We meet another man on the road who Jesus invites to follow Him. The man seems to be willing...but he has one reservation. He wants to bury his father. Now we don’t know if his father was well or in failing health or if, perhaps, he had just died. But it doesn’t really matter because this was an expectation in Jewish society. The oldest son eventually became responsible for his father’s household. When a couple got married, the bride came to live with the groom’s family for this very reason. And burying one’s parents was seen as part of the obligation to honor your mother and father. Even priests, who were by law forbidden to touch a dead body, were released from that obligation in order to bury a parent. Now it wasn’t a requirement under the law, but it had become expected as part of Jewish society.

Jesus’ reply is maybe one of the shocking things He ever said. His reply is, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Everybody traveling with Him hearing this would have been stunned. Jesus is refuting a time-honored custom that a lot of Jews thought was sacred. Jesus is saying, “Let those who stay behind, the spiritually dead, let them bury the bodies of the deceased. You’re spiritually alive – you’ve got more important things to do.” Scandalous? Absolutely. But Jesus is trying to shake us out of complacency. He’s trying to get us to see that the Kingdom of God is so important, so all-consuming, that everything else should fall by the wayside.

Have you ever read the side of a bottle of A-1 Steak Sauce? It’s the dumbest thing in the world. It talks about shaking the bottle, turning it upside down, getting every last drop out. You know what their slogan is? “A1. Yeah, it’s that important.” I don’t care if you own A1 stock, it’s not that important! Every commercial tells you that it’s important to look great, have a new car, and use medicines that only your doctor can tell you about. It’s ludicrous! But we act like lots of things in this world are important that aren’t. It’s easy to get the good confused with the best. There’s nothing wrong with taking care of our families; there’s nothing wrong with liking the things that God created and called good! But following Jesus into the Kingdom of God is always first. The Kingdom of God – now that’s the only thing that’s that important.

Third guy comes along, and he’s going to follow Jesus too. Now this guy’s smart. He knows his Bible, so he asks for the one thing he thinks Jesus won’t refuse. He says, “Let me go back and say goodbye to my family, and then I’m yours.” Now this guy knows that when Elijah went to recruit Elisha to become a prophet, Elisha asked Elijah if he could bid farewell to his family. Elijah agreed, Elisha said his goodbyes, and off they went. Jesus is a prophet like Elijah, right? Surely He can’t turn down this request!

And yet that's exactly what Jesus does. He says, "No one who starts plowing and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God." Now the soil in Israel is fertile, but it's also rough and challenging to plant. You start plowing and you don't pay close attention to where you're going, you're not only going to make mistakes, you're likely going to fall over. You have to be completely focused on the task. Harsh words? Yes. But Jesus is trying to get these folks past their rejection of Him. That rejection is not a "no," it's a "yes, but." "Yes, but" is a continuing problem for us in the church. It seems that Jesus is asking too much of us. We want to follow under our rules, under our conditions. So much of the Bible is messy – it asks for us to be countercultural. We're fine with that as long as we personally agree. But when our own personal beliefs run contrary to Scripture, we're too often ready to set aside Scripture for our own agenda. When we willingly and consciously follow our own hearts rather than Christ's heart, then we are rejecting Him too.

At first, this seems crazy. Why would Jesus demand such complete loyalty from His followers? Why was He willing to be rejected rather than to compromise? If He was just teaching wise and ethical conduct, maybe He would have given us wiggle room. But that's not why He came. He came to break the bonds of sin that hold us prisoner. He came to defeat sin and death and hell. He was Emmanuel, God with us, in the flesh, and what He taught was truth with a capital T. There's no wiggle room because demanding anything less than our very selves would be less than adequate. God wants to show us His grace and mercy, and through Christ we can have salvation from our sins. That salvation even extends to our disobedience when we don't fully follow.

But if God knows that the only way that we are going to be truly whole and healed and happy is when we are totally His, why would He ask anything less of us? Would you be OK with a doctor that left half a tumor? Would you be OK with a mechanic who forgot to put the spark plugs back into your engine? Would you be OK with a lawyer who would walk right before closing arguments? Those are the kind of things that would get them sued for incompetence! We expect that those we trust are going to do their work thoroughly and completely. Jesus is asking the same thing of us, for us to commit completely to Him, without regrets. Have you seen the ads for the Armed Forces that say, "We don't take applications, only commitments"? That's what Jesus asks of us – total dedication.

Jesus asks for it because it's the only way that we are going persevere through all we will face as Jesus' followers. We need to be ready that the world is going to hate us when we stand up as Christ-followers. I'm reading *Total Money Makeover* by financial guru Dave Ramsey. He shows the biblical principles behind getting out of debt – long and short of it, without debt, you can live as God desires. You can give as God wants you to give, you can go where God wants you to go, without worrying about paying off your car or your student loans or your credit cards. But he talks about how many of the people who follow his plan get totally rejected by their friends and family. These folks who are dead serious about getting out of debt start selling boats and cars and the frivolous things they've bought on credit, and their friends think they've gone nuts. They've so bought into this insane ideal of buying now and paying later that when somebody won't play by those rules, they get mad! They're upset because someone won't join them in building debt that is eventually going to cause a whole lot of grief someday. It's the ones who are getting free of their shackles that are being ridiculed!

And that kind of ridicule will follow us when we stand up for what Christ has taught us. His teachings show that everyone falls short of God's standard and that we must trust in Him rather than ourselves for salvation. Jesus' words make it clear that we aren't good people in need of a little help, but lost people, blind and deaf, who cannot find God without God Himself intervening. Jesus' own words tell us that those who reject Him and His salvation and continue in their sins will eternally perish; they will found guilty under God's law and be brought to eternal justice. And what the world can't understand is how the most loving action we can possibly take is to warn them of the eventual consequences of sin and to point them towards God's mercy...the mercy that has already been poured out for them, the mercy that will completely justify them before God if they say "yes" to His free gift and start walking with Him. The world says there is no truth and condemns us for saying we have it through Jesus Christ. But the world also says there is no hope, and yet we know there is hope. Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. He saves us and sustains us. He promises us hope and a future! Through all the rejection, when we act as faithful disciples proclaiming God's Word, God will sustain us.

So what would it look like for us to be faithful disciples in this world now? We obviously can't physically follow after Jesus like the early disciples did. But imagine with me what sold-out discipleship might look like. It might surprise you. It wouldn't necessarily be centered around this building. Because coming to every event the church has doesn't make you a Christ-follower. Lots of people around the country go to church services and Bible studies every week and they aren't followers because they're only in it for what they get out of it.

But what it would look like is this...it would be getting fully immersed in God's Word, not just paddling around in the kiddie pool and living off the old stories we heard in Sunday school, but diving into the deep end and getting serious about Bible study and figuring out how the entire Bible fits together. It doesn't take being smart, it just takes being faithful. It would be committing to holiness in all areas of our lives every day of the week. By holiness I mean committing to live life the way God desires, throwing out everything that isn't pleasing to Him and replacing it with things that are. And it would mean sharing the faith with other people. Because this isn't the good life we're talking about here; Jesus didn't come to give people a nice way to live. He came because under God's Law, we stand condemned. We have offended God with our sin. Jesus came to provide the payment for our sins so we could be under God's mercy rather than His judgment. The promise we have is not of a good life by worldly standards but an eternity spent with the God who made us and loves us. If we believe that Jesus is the only path away from God's condemnation and into God's good pleasure, we will start telling others about it. That's the really important message, and everybody needs to hear it. It will be rejected by some, but others will follow. That's what we're called to be as faithfully following disciples.

And we can do it. The Holy Spirit has been given to us so that we can become holy, faithful, sold-out followers. It sounded hard to the disciples and it sounds hard to us, but we can do it because we don't do it on our power, we do it in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to say "yes" to the Spirit's leading. And remember, when you have questions or concerns or a support coach to keep you faithfully following, I'm here and other Christians are here so we can back each other up. Jesus is telling us, "No more excuses. No more playing around. The time to follow God is now." Let's do that today.