

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Luke's Gospel: His face set towards Jerusalem, the cost of discipleship (Luke 9:46-62)

Good morning and welcome to this morning's talk as we look at some lessons from Luke's Gospel. Our reading today is from Luke 9:46-62 and our themes today are "His face set towards Jerusalem" and "The cost of discipleship".

It is worth remembering as we start that Luke's Gospel is distinguished by the theme of Christ as the perfect Man. Matthew's Gospel displays the Lord as the King; Mark shows us Him as the perfect Servant and John as the Son of God. So, in many ways Luke, the physician, sets out the Lord's journey through this world in a way that we all should be able to relate to. It shows us the display of God's grace in man, which could be seen only and perfectly in the "*Holy One to be born [and] called the Son of God*" as described in Luke 1:35. So, as we see the moral ways of God shine in the perfect man it shows us how far short the character of the heart of man, whether Christian or not, in comparison to God's perfect standard has become because of sin.

Let us therefore begin by reading the verses before us: "*Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, 'Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.'* Now John answered and said, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side.' Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.' And they went to another village. Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, 'Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' Then He said to another, 'Follow Me. But he said, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.' And another also said, 'Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.' But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:46-62).

From Luke 9:46-54 we see a demonstration of the heart of man. This gives me great encouragement when I feel my own heart being filled with my own interests and thoughts. By nature, we are self-important creatures, loving prominence and greatness above all else. The disciples were no different. They had heard things which were going to change the world and them forever and had seen a demonstration of the power and majesty of Christ. Some had been up the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36) and the others, who remained at the bottom of the hill, had been unable to cast out the demon from the young boy (Luke 9:37-40). The Lord then demonstrated His power over the demon in releasing the boy (Luke 9:41-42) and then told them of His death that was about to take place in Jerusalem (Luke 9:43-45). You would therefore expect that those men would have been lifted to a higher plain far above the things of this earth and thoughts of their own hearts. Sometimes we find ourselves in a place of spiritual enjoyment because we've seen God at work or heard from His word and think we'll never be the same again, yet I am often amazed how easily and quickly we can be taken back to the things of life and earth. The disciples in the immediate aftermath of these wonderful happenings start debating among themselves who should be the greatest. The Son of God became the Son of Man and showed us true humility so let's us always be very mindful of that if our own hearts seek pre-eminence, He came not to be served but to serve. How different perhaps the testimony would be now in the world if His people had shown this characteristic more!

In Luke 9:47 we get these wonderful words that we should keep in mind, in every aspect of life, "*And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart...*" I have already mentioned that our thoughts come from the sinful nature we all have, so how important it is that we control our thoughts to bring them into line with what God would find acceptable and would bring fruitfulness in our service. The Apostle Paul instructs us in the epistle to the Philippians to think on a whole range of things that are right and proper and will bring about blessing (see Philippians 4:8). We may not be always able to

prevent the thoughts that come into our mind, but we can choose not to change those thoughts into actions. What we think on today, we will believe tomorrow and will become the day after that. An old man once said that you cannot stop a bird landing on your head, but you can stop it making its nest!

Jesus then takes a little child and sets him in the middle of them (Luke 9:47). What a powerful lesson this must have been for them, they were debating who should be the greatest and the Lord shows them the weakest and tells them that the least will be the greatest (Luke 9:48). The Lord Himself laid aside His majesty and greatness, that which had been His for all eternity, and became the least even going into death itself. Now these disciples, and by extension, all who have believed on His name since that day to this, will be brought into eternal blessing.

It is also important to note in Luke 9:48 that it is in His name that the weakness of this little child is to be received. There is no point in recognising our own weakness, sinfulness and taking on humility if it is not in His name. The most monastic, self-denying, selfless serving and clean-living life will not in itself bring us into eternal blessing. We must become as little children and accept in child-like faith that mighty work of Calvary's cross that the Lord is explaining to them.

In Matthew 18:3 the Lord says, *"Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."* What a great word *"converted"* is though perhaps it has become old fashioned in our preaching. Yet this is the answer to the problems of this world. Men and women, boys and girls who are in their sins need to be converted to Christ. Let us ensure we never lose sight of the need for conversion in our preaching of the Gospel. After all we have a very compelling precedent for it.

We go into Luke 9:49 and it appears to me that John still hasn't really grasped what he has just been told as he raises this question of someone casting out demons who *"does not follow with us."* How often have I thought in my own mind *"they are not with us"*? Is it my church or His? Was it the disciple's kingdom they were seeking to build or was it Christ's? The epistles tell us that we should be mindful of those who come amongst us and preach another Gospel (see Galatians 1:6-9), but the Lord here responds to John with wonderful grace both to him and to those who were casting out demons in His name. In Luke 9:50, He tells John that *"[the person] who is not against us is on our side."*

We may not agree with someone else's methods but let us always remember that the One who knows the thoughts of the heart never makes a mistake and knows their motives. Again, as in the previous verses, (Luke 9:46-49) the Lord sees that this is being done in His name and this is the ultimate deciding factor.

So, we have seen the selfishness of the disciples as individuals and as a group and even under the cover of what is for the Lord's glory and reputation, but we now see in Luke 9:51-56 a very harsh response to those who are not following in the right way. It is ironic, is it not, that as Jesus is preparing to go in grace and meekness to Jerusalem to lay down His life for a sinful world that James and John want to call down fiery judgment on those who don't accept them.

The Samaritans were descendants of Jewish mixed marriages from the days of captivity and had formed their own religion as a mix of Jewish and pagan practices and had even set up their own temple. They were therefore despised by the Jews and James and John, aptly known as the "sons of thunder" (see Mark 3:17), were filled with what they would have seen as righteous indignation that the Lord had been rejected as He travelled back and forth to Jerusalem to celebrate various feasts in the lead up to that final visit to Jerusalem. Surely such insolence justified them calling fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans as had happened in the days of Elijah? (Luke 9:54). We need to remember, as they had to learn, that vengeance is the Lord's and He will recompense in His time (see Romans 12:19), in the meantime our responsibility is to preach the very message that He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

In Luke 9:51 and Luke 9:53 we get this great expression that the Lord's face was set steadfastly to go Jerusalem. In Isaiah 50:7 we get it expressed prophetically as being set like a flint. Think how hard flint is, how it was used for centuries as a cutting tool; nothing can withstand its power. He was steadfast in His purpose to go to Jerusalem and accomplish that for which He came into this world, which was to give His life as the perfect and final offering for sin.

Therefore, neither the rejection of the Samaritans or the misunderstanding of the disciples could distract Him from that task. I believe we can learn two things from this.

1. Appreciation for that determination for it has brought me and all believers into salvation and great blessing.
2. This is a great example for us that when we set our minds to carry out some service for the Lord, we should be determined to see it through. Not in a way that makes us unable to take feedback or alter course if amendments are required but in a way that ensures we don't just give up when obstacles arise or when we just feel it is taking up too much of our time and we cannot be bothered with it any more.

In a similar way to the thoughts that come into our mind that I mentioned earlier, there will always be plenty voices either in our own mind or externally around us that will be seeking to dissuade us in our work. The enemy is always busy trying to disrupt the work of God in some way or another.

It was this steadfast desire to go to Jerusalem that made the Samaritans unprepared to accept the disciples. He was moving through their villages which was in effect saying their religion was unacceptable and that the truth was in Jerusalem where He was about to bring that truth to fruition. All other religions of men are still unacceptable to the work of the cross and however much anything else might contribute to society or the earthly wellbeing of mankind, it should never replace or get in the way of the work of the Gospel message. So, as we go back to the reaction of James and John (Luke 9:54), however righteous their anger may have been, they had a big misunderstanding of the spirit of love and grace that they were now being shown.

Luke 9:55-56 show us the wonderful words of grace that come from the Saviour's heart of love even for those who had defiled and added to the laws of God given in the Old Testament. He was not saying that Elijah had been wrong in doing what he did all those years previously, He was simply saying that things had changed. A different spirit was now to be shown, a spirit of grace and love not just law. A new dispensation was being brought in and the disciples had to learn this. In John 1:17 we get that wonderful proclamation that makes this change clear: *"For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* I heard recently of someone who wanted nothing to do with Jesus Christ because He had been the cause of all the trouble and wars in the world. How far removed that is from the words of Jesus in Luke 9:55-56 and at the same time a terrible indictment against those who have professed His name down through the years. Let us be marked as those who seek to bring words of blessing and grace in Jesus' name, not destruction. Happily, though, after their rebuke, the end of Luke 9:56 finishes by telling us they were not put off and went to another village.

Our remaining verses, Luke 9:57-62 bring us to the second part of our subject for this talk, that is the cost of discipleship. In Luke 9:57 we have recorded this bold, but at the same time ill-thought out, claim by someone that they will follow the Lord Jesus wherever He goes. It is bold because it takes immense courage to follow the One who was isolated, hated, misunderstood and rejected by His people, the very ones He had come to redeem. Worse was to come at Jerusalem and it would appear, from the Lord's answer, that this person did not fully understand the cost of the promise they were making. It is like offering to buy something before we know whether we can afford it or not. How easy we can all get carried away by the moment and our own bravado. While we should be brave and courageous, we also should be sensible and realistic in the promises we make. The Lord's answer gives us this incredible insight into the position that the great Creator of the world was prepared to take to become a man and go into death for our salvation. I am reminded of the wonderful hymn that states,

*"As Son of Man it was,
Jesus our Lord,
He gave his life for us,
Jesus our Lord".*

James G Deck (1802-1884)

The Creator had provided for His creatures but now as Son of Man He had nothing, not even somewhere to lay His head (Luke 9:58). What humility and condescending grace! So, what if it meant that the cost of following was to lose everything for His sake? Perhaps rather than make claims as this person did, we should challenge ourselves privately how we would react. I never fail to be humbled when I consider the martyrs in our own country centuries ago who gave up their very lives so that we can have a Bible in our own language, knowledge of the Gospel and freedom to preach it. Even these disciples, apart from John, ended up being martyred in various awful circumstances in different parts of the world as they set out from Jerusalem to take the Gospel message to the world. John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos and some history records he survived being placed in a cauldron of boiling water before his exile. Today there are many reports that there are more people being persecuted because of their faith in Christ than at any other time in history.

In Luke 9:59, the next person challenged to follow wanted to put off time. The expression of being allowed to bury his father, does not necessarily mean that his father had actually died. It was a common figure of speech, meaning, "Let me wait until I receive my inheritance". In other words, I want to be financially secure in this world before I invest in the next. The Lord's response is so typical of the One who knows the hearts and minds perfectly, so He tells him to leave the mundane things of life to those who are spiritually dead and that those who are spiritually alive should go and preach the Gospel.

Then the next person to have an excuse in Luke 9:61 brings other people into the situation. It is now not just about his own desires, but other people are to be considered and so surely this will be more acceptable? However, it is another

temporal situation getting in the way of eternal issues. This is I suppose, to the words in Mark 8:36 when the Lord could say, *"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"*

Our final verse, Luke 9:62, gives us the analogy of a ploughman looking back. Currently, we have the situation where a tractor pulls the plough and so perhaps this would be different now but let us remember what it would have been like when horses or oxen did the job. The ploughman looking back would quite simply result in the animals making a crooked furrow and that would be useless to the farmer, irrespective of how much effort had been expended to do the job. The Lord is teaching them that forward looking determination with no indecision is required to expand the Kingdom of God. It is not saying that anybody who backslides or just loses their enthusiasm for the things of God will lose their salvation; that would suggest a failure of the work He was moving to Jerusalem to accomplish and that could never be.

I trust these few thoughts will be a great encouragement and a challenge to all who have heard them.

May God bless you all and thanks for listening.

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