

Followers of Jesus

Read Luke 9:51-62

Jos M. Strengholt

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[c]?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, 56and[d] 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-by 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."

1. Introduction

What does it mean to be a Christian?

If I would ask you what it means, I guess I would get some interesting and different answers, and all, I am sure, rather valid.

One of the manners in which the Bible defines Christians, is as people who follow Jesus, and we will think about that today. What does it mean to follow Jesus.

For my work I sit, more than I desire, in airplanes. If you look outside, after landing, you often see the little car that drives in front of the plane – to guide the plane to its parking lot. The small car has a lighted sign: Follow me. You don't want to think of what might happen if the pilot does not carefully follow that car. Not following the car leads to potentially deadly mistakes.

Let us together try to carefully listen to what the apostle Luke says about following Jesus, as not following Jesus, or following Him carelessly, may have dreadful consequences.

For understanding what Luke wrote, let us pray first.

Lord God in heaven, we pray your blessing
on my mouth, that I speak your word

and please open the eyes of our hearts and our minds,
that we all may understand what you have to say to us
and apply your words to our life –
so that we will be true followers of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

2. Samaria: Love your enemies

Luke describes three meetings with wannabe followers of Jesus in Luke 9. For each of those persons, Jesus has some sharp advice, teaching us what following Him truly entails.

In order for us to understand what He meant, it is important to first look at the context in which Jesus met these wannabe followers. Vs 51 says:

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

This verse is the hinge in the Gospel of Luke. The die has been cast. Jesus went to Jerusalem, where 6 months later He would suffer and die, to eventually also rise from death and ascend to God. He set his face to Jerusalem. The words speak about his decision and steadfastness. There was no turning back now. The last journey of his life had begun.

Jesus did something strange.

Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would normally take a route around Samaria, as that was considered enemy territory. That was, because Samaritans were a mixed race, of Jews and non-Jews. Because of their defective devotion to the true faith and because of their partly pagan ancestry, the Samaritans were despised by ordinary Jews. As they were seen as deviants, Jews were afraid to defile themselves by traveling through that area.

One effect of all this was also that the Jews did not allow them to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, the Samaritans decided to build their own temple on Mt. Gerizim.

Things between the nations became truly bad, when John Hyrcanus, a Jewish ruler around 100 BC, leveled the Samaritan temple, just as totally as the Twin Towers in New York were destroyed in 2001. Since then, relationships were totally disturbed. The Samaritans hated the Jews, and vice versa.

One result of this was that the Samaritans did not like to let the Jews pass through their territory when going from Galilee to Jerusalem, especially not when they went on a pilgrimage. It is not hard to imagine how these Jews, especially when they went on pilgrimage, did not show their best behavior to the Samaritans. They treated them as contaminated garbage, especially when they were so religiously charged by their pilgrimage.

Because of this, Jews who were traveling from Jerusalem to Galilee or the other way round, would cross over the Jordan River and avoid Samaria by going through Transjordan, and cross back over the river again once they had reached their destination.

Jesus had no time for this; His face was set for Jerusalem, there was urgency to his mission and beside that, He was not afraid of ‘contamination’ whatsoever. He even decided that he wanted to sleep in Samaria.

In order to find themselves a bed in Samaria, Jesus asked some of his followers, James and John, to go ahead of the group to find them a place in one of the villages.

But relations between Samaritans and Jews were too disturbed for such pleasantries and hospitality. They rudely refused to allow them to stay the night.

St Augustine, the foremost North African church father, underlined in one of his sermons that the Samaritans did not welcome Jesus, NOT as a personal matter, but because he was on his way to Jerusalem. They were not rejecting Jesus for whom He was, they were against helping any Jew on a pilgrimage.

Judgment on these wicked Samaritans was their deserved end, according to James and John:

Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?

They wanted eternal destruction for their enemies, who did not want to serve Jesus. Destroy them! Fire and brimstone on them! Do you see Jesus, they do not want to be your followers, and they reject you. Punish them with fire from heaven!

But Jesus had not come to destroy his enemies but to die for them. He had not come to condemn but to forgive. Jesus ‘he turned and rebuked them.’ He rebuked his followers for their lack of perception. It is significant that Luke, who wrote this, later describes in the book of Acts how just over half a year later, God DID send his fire - the Holy Spirit would be given from above – to Samaritans.

James and John and probably all other followers of Jesus, had not understood yet what following Jesus meant. They thought that following Jesus could be defined in terms of destroying enemies, hence, in terms of worldly power. Jesus had to teach them – and us – something about what following Him really means.

3. Lessons about following Jesus:

a) Wannabe Follower #1

While they continued their travel to Jerusalem, someone came and said to Jesus ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’

In the Gospel of Matthew we read that this man was actually a scribe – a Jewish theologian. I guess the disciples of Jesus were elated. One more man to join their group, an important man, a theologian. Their power was increasing!

But the answer of Jesus must have totally put them off. Jesus tells this scribe, this wannabe follower:

Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

Jesus refers here directly to his experience in Samaria, where He was not given a place to stay. He did not have a permanent abode, and was on his way to the place where he was to be rejected, suffer and die. There was no place for Him on earth; This is the very opposite of the powerplay of the disciples who wanted to destroy the Samaritan enemies.

Those who are Christians follow a Master who lived a life of humiliation. Deliverance came via a cross, not with fire from heaven. So, if you want to follow Jesus, do not think you will be the powerful one. Do not expect riches, prosperity, wealth, earthly blessings.

There is actually another level to the words of Jesus. We are familiar with the association of nations with certain animals: for instance, Australia with kangaroos, Egypt with the eagle, England with the lion, the USA with the eagle, Russia with the bear, China with the dragon. Holland also with a lion – don't ask me why.

In the first century the gentile nations, including Rome, were referred to as 'birds of the air' by the Jews. Members of the Ammonite nation, to which the ruler of Israel, Herod also belonged, were called 'foxes'. You may recall Jesus referring to Herod as 'that fox' in Luke 13.

So if Jesus says that foxes have holes and birds have nests, his audience could have easily understood that he referred to those who ruled over Israel in those days. He suggests that they have their place and their power in the land, but for Him there is no place.

Hence, Jesus asks this theologian to reconsider and calculate the cost. Jesus is rejected everywhere – not only in Samaria, but also in Judea, Galilee, and ultimately Jerusalem will reject him.

The first lesson of Jesus on discipleship is: Being a follower of Jesus is costly; it implies rejection and suffering.

Are you sure you want to follow me, if that is part of the deal?

With this first candidate, Jesus appears to demand self-sacrifice. A Christianity that focuses on health, strength, power, success, is suspect of distancing itself from Jesus Christ.

Just as a Christianity that enjoys an intimate relationship with the foxes and the birds of our world, with the cultural and political powers, is suspect.

Jesus stood by the sick, the persecuted, he spoke truth even if that was not appreciated by the leaders of his days, and He proclaimed the radical Gospel of the Kingdom of God. That did not make HIM popular, and it cannot make US popular.

This sounds rather tough and it is. But the suffering of Jesus led to his resurrection, just as our following of Jesus, tough as it may be, has fantastic impact on our own lives – both for now and for eternity, and also on the society we live in. Following Him is tough, the result is great.

b) Wannabe Follower 2

Immediately Luke tells us of another wannabe follower. Jesus invites this man to follow Him, and the man agrees, but he has a precondition:

Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

‘Yes Lord I am yours but let me first...’ What a common threat in our lives. ‘Yes Lord I know what you ask of me is good, but let me first...’

The man in our story wants to first bury his father.
Well that sounds like a very reasonable request.

The first impression you get from this verse, is that the man’s father has just died, and that he wants to go to his funeral and then, maybe next day, follow Jesus. With this idea in mind, the answer of Jesus seems unreasonable. Is it not absolutely normal, if a close family-member has died, to take care of the funeral?

Middle Eastern, Jewish and Arab readers of the New Testament disagree with this understanding of the text. If indeed the father had just died, this man would never have met Jesus, as he would be mourning rather than talking with a traveling teacher at the roadside.

The phrase "to bury one's father" has a long history here in the Middle East as an expression for doing one's sacred duty of remaining home until one's parents are respectfully buried. That could be years, if not decades. That is what in those days would be expected of children. For respect of their parents, they did not travel far and they would be around them until they died.

The man in our story tries to balance obedience to Jesus with the culture and customs of that time. ‘Jesus, my community and my family have certain expectations of me. The pull of my community and what the neighbors think is very strong. I cannot violate those community standards. I'll follow you after I've done those duties.’

Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Jesus says basically that those who do not follow Him are spiritually dead; let them worry about matters of culture or family customs.

For this second man, burying his father was a serious moral obligation, but Jesus says: Follow me, go and proclaim that God is here in the person of Jesus, to make all people alive in the kingdom of God’.

He does not say that burying one’s parents is wrong. He often enough in the Gospels shows that we have to honor our parents. Even on the cross, when he was dying, he showed his special and deep love for his mother.

But when it comes to following Jesus, that must always have priority over family matters. Just as He himself made his own journey for dying in Jerusalem his sole priority. He expects that we do not let our culture and customs stop us from today following him.

In one of his sermons, St Augustin, says that the excuse of this second wannabe follower was ‘a dutiful one, but the Master taught him what he ought to prefer. A father must be honored, but God must be obeyed.’

Jesus Himself had already cut his ties with his own family - his teenage choice to stay with the rabbis in the temple at Jerusalem was a first indication. When he was 30 he left the family altogether to take up a life on the road. He is not marrying, not fitting in, not settling down, he did not have a house, he is not sticking around to organize funerals for his father and mother.

The second lesson about following Jesus is that we should not let culture, habits, even good culture and good habits, come in the way of obeying Jesus Christ and doing the will of God. Those who call themselves Christians must realize that following Jesus must have absolute priority. The fact that our culture and its precepts may make that difficult is no acceptable excuse.

c) Wannabe Follower #3

Then the third potential follower of Jesus comes along. He volunteered to follow Jesus, but he also had a precondition, and a seemingly reasonable one. He wanted to go home first and say good bye to his family.

I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.

The translation of the words of the man should really be: ‘let me go home and take my leave’. In the Middle East, the person leaving always asks permission, ‘an iznak, with your permission, and the one staying behind says good bye. Between a son and his parents this is far more than a formality. This is an important matter, even today. And if the father does not want the son to go, he does not go.

It is possible that the young men knew that his father would not allow him to follow Jesus. It is easy to agree to something when you know a higher authority will probably overrule you. Maybe you've used that dodge yourself: ‘Oh, I'd love to but I have to ask...’ and depending what the request is you can fill in the blank with spouse, parents, children, supervisor, boss, head office, whatever.

The response that Jesus gives:

No person who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.

A man on the way to Jerusalem would understand the importance of looking forward during plowing. The land was rough, uneven, full of stones, and trees. To plough the field and to create straight furrows demanded total attention. It was extremely hard work.

The right hand was for the ox, to ensure that he walked straight. With the left hand the plough was held and steered, to plough in the right depth, to avoid stones, and to create straight furrows. It was very tough work. If the farmer would not fully concentrate on his job at hand, he would mess up, even maybe break the blade of the plough.

The illustration is of a potential disciple in two minds.

The third lesson Jesus teaches on following him, seems to be: Followers of Jesus cannot allow anyone or anything to take precedence over following Jesus NOW

There is no higher authority than his, and seeking permission to follow Jesus does not show the single-mindedness that should be part of the Christian life. In the end, it does not matter what our friends and family think and we cannot use that as an excuse for delaying following Jesus NOW. WE simply cannot allow all sorts of things, important as they may be, distract us.

5) Conclusion

Let me conclude. From this story about Jesus' journey through Samaria and the three wannabe followers of Him, we learn some deep and practical lessons about the immense implications of the Christian faith for our life.

In the first place, followers of Jesus do not participate in the hatred of their nations versus other nations. The Jews deeply hated the Samaritans and the Roman occupiers. Jesus rejected this attitude and rebukes his followers for that type of thinking.

In the nation you are from, who are considered the worst enemies? What is the nation or group of people that we tend to hate? Following Jesus means giving up on that hatred. It means that we pray for them and that we love them. We do not want Samaria to be destroyed, but we pray for its redemption. We wish our enemies the best.

Not only do we wish the best for those outside our society that are seen as strange, wrong or bad, but inside our own society, We align ourselves with the misfits, the losers, the people in trouble, who are the victims. Victims of their own choices, and of how they are treated by society and by our governments.

Beside that, we accept the urgency of making the Gospel known to broken humanity. Christians proclaim that all people – including the cultural and social elites and the political leaders – are sinners and that they must repent and turn to God through Jesus Christ.

And all this, dear friends, is usually not appreciated. It makes us unpopular with the cultural and political leaders of our countries, and often also with our own family and colleagues. But this is the radical lifestyle Jesus asks from Christians.

That is a lifestyle where not our cultural norms, our friends, our family, decide how we live, but where Jesus Christ is our priority model and master.

No wonder that Jesus teaches that his followers should not expect life to be a picnic. It would be very strange to expect life to be rosy if we follow someone who suffered and died at the hands of his own people.

And finally, we are invited to begin this radical discipleship, this following of Jesus, today. Now. The importance of it is so enormous, it allows no delay. Whatever our friends, family members or our society tell us.

The privilege and the seriousness of following Christ are of such tremendous magnitude that there is no room for excuses, or for compromise, or for half-heartedness.

And what an encouragement to know that He who calls us to complete devotion and loyalty, Himself followed wholeheartedly the road of self-denial - yea, even to the death of the cross!

And in that our hope is rooted. For who is able to follow him in such manner? I readily admit, at times I get distracted from seeking God's Kingdom. At times there are other concerns which take first priority. At times my families, or friends, are more important than God and His Kingdom rule. I believe each of us can echo those sentiments. There are times when the Kingdom life is the furthest thing from our minds.

We all fall short. But we may thank God: Holy Communion reminds us that He forgives imperfect followers, and as long as we follow, we receive His forgiveness for the many times that we stumble while on the journey with Him.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – Amen.