

Three Responses to Jesus

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 1992. Scripture Lesson: Luke 9:51-62.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

① Someone said to Jesus, "I'll 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." Meaning what? "Do you realize you won't have a place to call home if you follow me?"

From my earliest years I've believed that I'm saved by God's grace, through faith in Christ. I've gone through periods of back-sliding as well as growth but from my youngest years I've claimed to be a follower of Jesus. Nevertheless, I've never been homeless. And yet Jesus implies that his followers will have no place to lay ~~their head.~~

② To another Jesus said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

In the past month John has taken his aging father to the hospital three times because of his father's congestive heart failure. Once at 4 o'clock in the morning, another time at 6:30 in the morning and another time in the afternoon when he was forced to take time off from work. He's missed his son's soccer game, his daughter's piano recital, his own anniversary, and at least one session meeting. How does John hear this word of Jesus in our Gospel lesson?

③ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is

fit for the kingdom of God.”

Mary is trying to raise three small children on her own. She works full time and then comes home to fix dinner and attend ^{baseball} games and evening school events. She's both father and mother to her children. Her husband left several years ago without even saying goodbye seeking freedom and self-fulfillment. How does Mary hear this word of Jesus?

1. It's hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus made unreasonable demands which seem to be humanly impossible to fulfill. In every age the church has been tempted to rationalize and relativize the demands of Jesus on his followers. I have a great temptation to water down what Jesus says; to make what he says more reasonable and acceptable to middle class families, like my own, who have homes and responsibilities to aging parents and families.

I'd be more comfortable with a more reasonable Jesus. The Jesus I prefer is a middle-class, American Jesus like me. He's a Jesus who assures us that he'll never ask us to make unreasonable sacrifices. He assures us that he's come to help us to find ourselves rather than to deny ourselves. The Modern Jesus affirms us and understands us and accepts us without making any demands on our lives; without making any value judgments on our priorities and lifestyles.

2. But the Jesus of the Bible is a strange, imperious, undemocratic, ~~un-American~~ Jesus who's in conflict both with ancient Palestinian values as well as our own. And I ask myself, "Do I really trust this Jesus of the Bible or have I accepted a tamed and domesticated Jesus? Does the Jesus I trust bear any resemblance to the ancient Palestinian Jew? who called men women to place him before their wives, their parents, their families."

The Jesus of Scripture forewarns would-be disciples that discipleship entails sacrifice. At the very least he tells us that we can't love our parents and families as we ought unless Christ and ^{the fulfillment of} his kingdom is foremost in our lives. At the very least he ^{us} tells that we dare not delay following him for any reason, however good.

Most of us have made a profession of faith to renounce evil, to renounce sin, to turn to Christ, and to follow him. But that's so general. Do we need to ^{be} told that church membership is a matter of following Jesus in definite ways; that it involves a commitment at least as great as membership in the Masons, Kiwanis, Rotary or Lions? ~~who will answer~~ ^{hear silence -}

What if we were to say to prospective members, "God loves you and accepts you as you are through faith in Christ, but we believe that Christ expects all those who would follow him, through membership in the Oxford Presbyterian Church, ~~&~~

✓ to participate in at least one service project a year if physically able. It could be working on a Habitat for Humanity project or picking up a shut-in for church one Sunday a year; - ~~if a shut-in sending love letters or anniversary cards to members~~

✓ to give at least 10% of your income for the support of the ministry of Christ around the world and here in Oxford.

✓ to worship God every Sunday, with God's people, whether you feel like or not, ^{when you have weekday guests} despite guests visiting in your homes, and whether you're on vacation or at home.

✓ to pray every day for our baptized children, our adults members, our sick and shut-in.

But you say, those are all human rules that lead to legalism (one of the most despised of all modern sins). Of course, we dare not equate following Christ with

being a church member, or following human rules, but we dare not give the impression that one can follow Christ abstractly, apart from ~~the~~ concrete commitments to the people of God. Following Christ is not a private religious experience; it has nothing to do with feeling religious. Seeking religious experiences can actually be an attempt to avoid following Jesus. Following Jesus doesn't even require mental assent to doctrines.

God accepts us freely by grace through faith in Christ but discipleship requires following Jesus in specific ways.^{For some leading a nice life & preaching the Gospel; for some, going to a distant mission field where one has no base of support & father's death;} Following Christ has its rewards but we dare not ^{saying goodbye, sometimes Jesus call is so urgent that we have not delay even to say goodbye} forget that it involves sacrifice; oftentimes painful sacrifice^{and} and sometimes rejection. ^{sometimes Jesus calls us to choose not so much between a clear-cut evil and a clear-cut good; but between ~~good~~ two good things -}

I'd count this sermon a good sermon if I could get you to leave this sanctuary this morning with the troubling words of Jesus ringing in your ears, "Follow me!"

Have we who have confessed our faith in Christ confessed a tamed, domesticated Jesus who blesses our values and lifestyle but never challenges us to the sacrifice of obedience?

Perhaps some of you have never confessed your faith in Christ. You don't know for sure what you believe about Christ or who he is.^{And you'd have heard Jesus say this morning} But, perhaps, you have heard Christ's command "Follow me."^{Talk to someone about Jesus. No command of Christ was begun to haunt you.} I'd urge you not to delay. Go home and read the Gospel of Luke this afternoon. Listen to how Luke and others bear witness to Jesus.^{Follow his commands in specific ways and you will come to know who he is and that he is the One to whom you belong in life and death, your Lord and Savior.}

Let us pray: Holy God: your Son demands complete devotion. Give us courage to take up our cross, and, without turning back, to follow where he leads us, Christ our Lord and Master. Amen.