

1Kings 19:15 Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. 16 Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

1Kings 19:19 So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. 20 He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” 21 He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Luke 9:51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do

you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village.

Luke 9:57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58 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.” 59 To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 60 But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61 Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” 62 Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

BURNING OUR BRIDGES

At the beginning of the movie, Jerry McGuire, Jerry is caught in a rat race of a job as a sports agent. He makes his living representing spoiled, overpaid athletes.

But one night in a sort of breakdown, Jerry is convicted by the lack of morality in his profession.

After tossing and turning in a vain attempt sleep, he jumps out of bed, and turns on his computer.

Jerry writes a long mission statement. He criticizes what his job has become and makes some rather radical proposals for reform. He then copies the memo and has it put in the mailboxes of all his coworkers.

When he timidly enters the office the next day, he receives a warm, standing ovation for his act of courage and vision. And one of his coworkers says under breath, “Thank God you said it.”

As you might guess, his act of courage did not lead to a reform of their business or to a new sense of dedication and integrity. In short order his clients were placed with other agents, and he was fired by one of his best friends.

Sometimes integrity has a high price tag. Jerry had burned his bridges, and there was no turning back.

Most of us are like Jerry’s co-workers. We think it is foolish to burn our bridges. We think it is foolish to make a decision that you can’t change, and alienate people that you might need later on. We believe in

playing it safe and having a fall back position should things not work out.

And that is often good advice when it comes to most matters. Whether you're talking about employment, family, or money, the old adage applies.

Don't burn your bridges. Keep your options open.

A LEAP OF FAITH

But, conventional wisdom is turned on its head when it comes to Christian discipleship. Those who are called by God are often asked to burn their bridges. They are not called to do the safe thing; they are called to do the risky thing.

Maybe that's why some theologians talk about a "leap of faith." Following Jesus is like skydiving. Once you make the jump you are totally committed!

Both the Old Testament lesson and the New Testament lesson for today are about the cost of discipleship. Those who are called by God are not called to do the easy, safe thing. They are called to burn their bridges. They are called to take a leap of faith.

And sometimes that feels more like judgment than salvation.

The Old Testament lesson is about the call of Elisha to succeed Elijah as God's prophet. God told Elijah to anoint Elisha as the next prophet of Israel. So Elijah found Elisha in the field plowing. There were twelve yoke (or pair) of oxen in that field and Elisha himself was working pair number twelve. I think we can safely assume that Elisha was a hard working, wealthy farmer.

But, what happened next changed his life forever.

Elijah placed his cloak (or mantle) upon Elisha. This was symbolic of the fact that God had chosen Elisha to be Elijah's successor. (This is where we get the phrase, "take up the mantle," which of course means to take over some important task.)

Elisha knew exactly what this meant. It meant that he would have to leave his job, his family and his friends to follow Elijah.

And so Elisha asked if he could kiss his mother and father goodbye. Elijah agreed. But, Elisha did more than just say goodbye to his family. He had a

barbeque for the whole community. He slaughters his oxen and uses his plow to fuel the fire.

The cost of discipleship was high for Elisha. This was not just a meal. It was a symbolic way of accepting God's call. He literally burned his bridges; he burned his only means of making a living in order to move on to a new way of life.

It was a costly and risky thing to do. And throughout the Bible you see the same story being repeated.

THE RADICAL CALL OF DISCIPLESHIP

For example, think about the call of Moses. God called him to leave his family and the safety of his life as a nomadic rancher in order to go to the big city and confront Pharaoh with God's demand ... let my people go.

Moses suggested that perhaps God should get someone who was a better public speaker!

God called Isaiah to be his prophet, and he felt so inadequate that he referred to himself as a man of unclean lips who lives among a people of unclean lips. And yet, in the end Isaiah hears himself saying, "Here am I. Send me."

Jeremiah complained that he was too young and too inexperienced to be God's prophet. God said that He had been preparing Jeremiah for this task from the time he was in his mother's womb.

In the final analysis these prophets were required to leave their excuses and their homes in order to follow the call of God. The same was true of Jesus' disciples. They dropped their fishing nets, left their family and followed Jesus.

As you read all of those call stories you have to wonder, "What were they thinking? How could they give up everything on the spur of the moment?"

I believe the call of God overwhelmed and overshadowed everything else in their lives. A good summary of this is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Before he became a Christian Paul was a person of considerable accomplishment. But, none of his accomplishments meant anything in comparison to the call of Christ.

He wrote,

"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake

I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ...”
(Philippians 3:8)

That’s what this passage is all about. In this passage we learn that God’s call takes precedence not only over the worst things in our life but also it takes precedence over even the best things in our life.

Even our greatest accomplishments are nothing compared to God’s plan for our lives. Even life’s most important duties are nullified by the call to follow Christ.

A FEW DISCLAIMERS

This sermon needs to come with a few disclaimers. There are many cults that have used words like these to spiritually kidnap their followers and take them away from their families. Remember that it Jesus that we follow and not some half-baked Messiah “wanna-be.”

Second, don’t think that what Jesus says in this passage negates in any way our obligation to take care of our family. Jesus roundly criticized some religious leaders of his day when they used religious

rules and technicalities to avoid their financial obligations to their parents.

The Bible still teaches us to honor our father and mother. Family life is still important. God does not want us to shirk our duties to our family.

On the other hand we need to keep our priorities straight. We should not make our family into an idol. Even our family should take second place to the call of God.

In fact I think that families often get into trouble because we forget our priorities. If we put our family members in the place of God we expect too much of them.

Commentator Fred Craddock put it this way;

“Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from possession and worship of family and have found the distance necessary to love them.”

If we put our family on the pedestal that only God should stand, then that relationship will often break under the strain of unhealthy expectations. More that

that, our desire to preserve the “perfect” home will prevent us from taking the risk of following Jesus.

Notice that in our lesson for today Jesus requires those who want to be his disciples to drop everything and follow him. Even their duty to family takes a back seat to the call of Christ.

THE HINGE OF THE GOSPEL

It sounds harsh to our ears, but remember the context of this passage. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. The Bible tells us that when the days drew near for Jesus to be “taken up” he “set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Some commentators refer to this verse as the hinge of the gospel. From this point on in the gospel of Luke Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

If the gospel of Luke were made into a movie, at this point there would be a close up of the actor playing Jesus who would display a determined look. Perhaps there would even be a flash forward, in which Jesus sees three crosses on a hill in Jerusalem and also an empty tomb.

In other words the cross and the resurrection are already before Jesus. He knows what he faces, and he knows that anyone who goes with him must be totally committed. He will be rejected and those who follow him will be rejected as well.

Jesus' inner group of disciples understood this all too well. They begged Jesus not to go into Jerusalem. They knew that any messianic pretender who entered Jerusalem would be crucified.

The cruelty of the Roman government was well documented. For example, when the Jews rebelled against the Romans in 70 AD do you know what the Romans did when they recaptured Jerusalem? They killed everyone in the city. They put every man, woman and child to the sword.

That's what happened when a Messiah dared to challenge "the power that be" in those days.

But, Jesus was insistent. He was going to Jerusalem. And if any wanted to follow Jesus on that route, he wanted to make the consequences clear. They would have to take up a cross. They would have to share the sacrifice as well as the glory. (See, for example, Luke 14:27)

Discipleship has a high price tag. When the disciples of Jesus take up the mantle of faith they also take up a cross. Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the disciples of Jesus will be homeless.

REJECTION IN SAMARIA

There is a foreshadowing of this rejection in our lesson for today. James and John enter a Samaritan city to prepare for Jesus' arrival. But, the Samaritans don't want Jesus. They have rejected him because (as the Scripture puts it) his face was set toward Jerusalem.

In other words the Samaritans rejected Jesus on theological grounds. Jesus in his insistence on going to Jerusalem confirmed that Jerusalem is indeed the holy city, the place where God's plan will unfold.

But, as you may remember from the story of the woman at the well (John 4:19-26) the Samaritans didn't think that was true. They thought they had the right answers, that they could worship God just as well in their own land and in their own way. In fact they believed their way was the right way.

There was a reason that pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem avoided Samaria. They were often

harassed and hindered by the population. Religious differences had once again spilled over into civil unrest.

Perhaps recalling the Elijah story and how Elijah destroyed the prophets of Baal and those who cooperated with this heresy James and John (the sons of thunder) asked Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven and destroy these heretics.

Commenting on this passage in 1711 Jonathan Swift wrote, “They have just enough religion to hate, but not enough to love one another.” Isn’t that a good commentary on what often happens even today? People have enough religion to hate but not enough to love one another.

The disciples had dropped everything to follow Jesus. But, they still didn’t understand Jesus.

Jesus didn’t want to destroy his enemies. Jesus wanted to save his enemies.

Indeed Jesus was headed for Jerusalem to be killed by the very people he loved. He was going to voluntarily take up the cross of forgiveness for those who wanted him destroyed.

ENEMIES TRANSFORMED INTO BELIEVERS

Christians down through the ages and even today have called down fire from heaven to consume their enemies. But, Jesus rebukes that approach.

Jesus tells us that when people reject us we should move on and leave the judgment to God. More than that, the Bible tells us that the sacrifice of God in Christ even has the potential to turn enemies into believers.

Indeed this happened not long after the time Jesus was “taken up” to heaven. Luke in his second volume of early Christian history, the book of Acts tells us that Jesus commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Luke 1:8)

And through the power of the Spirit these dispirited disciples became beacons of hope. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the rest of the ancient world were indeed changed.

The rejection of Jesus in Samaria and Jerusalem was not the end of the story. It was just the beginning.

The place of Jesus' crucifixion became the place where the power of forgiveness and resurrection began to spread to the whole world. Former enemies, including Samaritans (Acts 8:5-25) were transformed into disciples. Some of those who had rejected and even crucified Jesus now took up a cross and followed Jesus.

THE MOMENT TO DECIDE

Sometimes people ask me,

“Do you think Jesus wants us to love our enemies? Do you think Jesus actually might call us to leave our old life behind and follow him?”

How would you answer that question? Does Jesus want us to take up a cross and follow him to Jerusalem? Does God want us to burn our bridges with the past so that we can become God's prophet?

It doesn't happen all the time. But, there are moments in our life when we are called to risk everything for our faith. The words of James Russell Lowell put it well. “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide, In the strife of Truth and Falsehood, for the good or evil side.”

We will be celebrating the birthday of our country soon. When our ancestors signed the Declaration of Independence, it was not an easy decision.

They were risking their homes, their family, and their fortune. They were putting everything on the line in order to make the dream of freedom come true. It was a turning point in their lives. There would be no turning back.

In the same way there are times when we have to decide if we are “all in” when it comes to the kingdom of God. There are times when that old gospel song, “I have decided to follow Jesus ... no turning back, no turning back” is more than a song that we sing but a choice that comes our way.

FIXING OUR EYES UPON JESUS

Most of us dread that moment. We think that it would be better to have a faith that does not require so much of us. We think that it would be better to have a faith that allows to remain comfortably entrenched in our old way of life.

Jesus tells us this is not possible. Jesus says that if we put our hand to the plow and then look back we are not fit for the kingdom of God.

Do you know what that means? When you are plowing it is important to keep a fixed point that is far ahead of you in your sight. In this way you are able to plow a straight furrow.

In the same way it is important to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is (the book of Hebrews tells us) the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (See Hebrews 12:2)

In other words when the hard moments of decision come to our life it is important to look to Jesus. We take his example of love and forgiveness on the cross as our guide.

And like him we are encouraged to look beyond the shame and frustration of the moment to the eternal hope of resurrection and salvation. Instead of calling down fire upon the heads of enemies we call down a message of grace and forgiveness.

Remember the road to Jerusalem is not only about a crucifixion but also a resurrection. That was true for Jesus, and it is true for us as well. In order to plow a

straight furrow in our time of testing we need to keep our eyes focused on a risen Savior.

A JOURNEY WORTH TAKING

There is an ancient legend from India about a woman who lived with her family in a rural area. A tiger killed her husband one year. A cobra bit her son the next year. An elephant trampled her daughter the next year.

Finally someone asked her why she didn't move to the city. She replied, "That's crazy. Don't you know that the city is dangerous?"

Going with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem is always dangerous. Going with Jesus will change us and change is always painful. But, is following Jesus worse than staying where we are right now?

In our passage for today Jesus has once again warned that discipleship comes at a high price. Burning bridges and following Jesus is never an easy thing to do.

And yet, despite the challenge, it is a journey worth taking. He gives our lives a sense of purpose.

It is only through the long and difficult personal struggle to follow Jesus that we learn the paradoxical truth that He taught long ago.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”
(Luke 9:24)

AMEN.