

# FOLLOWING THE CRUCIFIED

Luke 9:51-62

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

June, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 9, verses 51 through 62. It is on page 734 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples the cost of following him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 9, beginning at verse 51, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>51</sup> When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

<sup>52</sup> And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. <sup>53</sup> But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup> And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

<sup>55</sup> But he turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup> And they went on to another village.

<sup>57</sup> As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." <sup>58</sup> 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." <sup>59</sup> To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." <sup>60</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." <sup>61</sup> Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

<sup>62</sup> Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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What does the Christian faith require of you? What does God the Father require of you to be his child? What does Jesus require of you to be his disciple?

On the one hand, it requires nothing, but on the other hand, it requires everything. It requires nothing of you, and it requires everything of you at the same time. This is what we call a paradox—two or more seemingly contradictory truths that are somehow both true at the same time.

The Christian faith has a number of paradoxes. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity might be considered a paradox. We have one God, and this one God consists of three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And each of these three persons are not merely a fraction of God, but each person possesses the entire divine nature. If that doesn't make complete sense in your mind, that's because it's a paradox.

The nature of Jesus Christ might also be considered a paradox. He is both true God and true man. He is not part God and part man. He is fully God and fully man at the same time.

The nature of a Christian is also a paradox. We are sinners, and we are also saints. We are not part sinner and part saint, but we are fully both. You are just as much a sinner as you would be if you were not a Christian, but you are also completely righteous. You can never be more righteous than you are right now.

And then there is the paradox before us this morning: that God requires nothing of us, yet he also requires everything.

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This paradox is parallel to the paradox of being a child. And this comparison should be helpful for us, because the parent-child relationship is the primary relationship in this world that illustrates the Christian's relationship to God. What does a parent require of a child? On the one hand, absolutely nothing. There is nothing the child has to do in order to be called a child of its parents, and there is nothing the child has to do in order to earn its parents' love. Parents—at least when they parent the way God desires—love their children unconditionally. Children do nothing to become children, and they are not required to do anything to remain their parents' children. It is all based on the activity and unconditional love of the parents. Good parents require nothing of their children in this respect.

But parents also require everything of their children. And we all learned this from the time we lived under our parents' roof. No parent—or, at least, no good parent—ever says to their children, “You can obey fifty percent of my commandments.” That would be ridiculous. The child does not get a choice in which commandments they will keep and which commandments they will break. Of course, children will break their parents' commandments from time to time, and every parent knows this. But with every single commandment, the parent expects the child to keep it. Parents can sympathize with their children. They know that sometimes it is hard to obey their commandments, but they always expect obedience.

This is why every parent will say at some point, probably several times, “Because I said so.” Parents might intend to explain the logic of every commandment to their child, but sometimes you don't really have time, or your child might not have the capacity to understand, so you use the old fallback: “Because I said so.” And that should be good enough, because parents have complete authority. That is simply the nature of the parent-child relationship.

The same thing is true in our relationship to God. God gives us commandments. All of them have good reasons, and he has revealed the reasons for at least most of them. But even if we don't know the reasons for his commandments, we must obey them anyway. “Because God said so,” is a good enough reason to keep his commandments. That is because he is our Father, and we are his children.

God has made us to be his children through Jesus Christ. This required nothing of us. And nothing is required of us to remain his children. All of this is by his grace. But since we are his children, we are also commanded to submit to his complete authority.

That's the paradox. God requires nothing of us, and he also requires everything of us.

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Both sides of this paradox are seen in the text for this morning. The first half of the text, verses 51 through 56, are all about what Jesus has done to make you his own.

Verse 51 is a turning point in *The Gospel of Luke*. Jesus' mission throughout the gospel is the same: to suffer, die, and rise again for the salvation of the world. But Jesus' focus is intensified at this point. “The days drew near for him to be taken up” (9:51). This refers not merely to his ascension, when he was lifted up from the earth on a cloud, but also to his crucifixion, when he was lifted up from the earth on the cross. So the days drew near for this event, and Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51).

It's kind of like that scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first book in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Perhaps you've read the books or watched the movies. If you haven't, just hang in there for a moment, this should take about a minute and twenty seconds. I'm also going to spoil

some stuff. Now I think the statute of limitations on spoiling *The Lord of the Rings* has expired, but if you don't want to hear it, just plug your ears and count to eighty.

It's kind of like the scene in the first book, when the whole fellowship is together in Rivendell, and they're trying to figure out what to do with this powerful and evil ring. Finally it becomes apparent that Frodo, the brave little hobbit, must carry it to Mordor and cast it into the fire. So he sets his face toward Mordor. And as he gets closer and closer to this mountain, his path becomes darker and darker, and lonelier and lonelier, until finally he is all alone, carrying this burden into the fiery pit from which it came. Now what does that sound like?

J.R.R. Tolkien, the guy who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, was a Christian. And though he never admitted that the parallel to Jesus was intentional, it's hard to imagine that his Christian faith didn't at least influence the story. It may have even been a subconscious accident.

It's a dark and beautiful picture of the ministry of Jesus, who set his face toward Jerusalem. And as he gets closer and closer to the mountain called "the skull," the darkness and hatred descend upon him, and his band of disciples gets smaller and smaller, until it culminates with him alone and dead on a cross, carrying the burden of sin into the grave, where it is destroyed forever. This is the first part of the text.

There's also a brief scene in there with James and John that's a little bit shocking. We won't go into it, but it demonstrates that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, not merely to save Jews, but also Samaritans and the entire world.

So Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and the cross, with all of its shame and suffering and darkness, in order to redeem the world from sin and death. For this reason God requires nothing of you. No amount of obedience can earn his favor. Nothing you do can make you his child. He has adopted you through Jesus Christ. God the Father is pleased with you on account of Jesus Christ. In this way, God requires nothing of you.

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But God also requires everything of you. We see this in the second part of the lesson. Jesus has three conversations with people along the road. All three of these people want to follow Jesus, but Jesus is honest and upfront about what it will cost them.

To the first, Jesus says, "**Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head**" (9:58). In other words, *Are you okay with being homeless? Because that's what following Jesus could mean.*

The second man has a condition to following Jesus: "Let me first go and bury my father." Jesus responds rather harshly, "**Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God**" (9:60). In other words, *Are you okay with missing important events? Because that's what following Jesus could mean.*

The third person just wants to say goodbye to his family, which seems reasonable, but Jesus says to him, "**No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God**" (9:62). In other words, *Are you okay with being estranged from your family, because that's what following Jesus could mean.*

These are hard conversations. Jesus kind of comes across as insensitive. And, in the case of the second and third, it even sounds like he's asking his disciples to abandon their families, which would violate the Fourth and Sixth Commandments.

I'm going to suggest a way of understanding these conversations where Jesus is not actually asking his disciples to break the commandments. Instead, he is emphasizing the importance of the First Commandment.

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He is telling his disciples to put aside their false gods. And false gods can be anything. False gods do not merely consist of competing deities, like Allah or the Buddha or some golden statue. False gods can be anything we fear, love, or trust in more than the one true God. Examine your own hearts by asking these three questions: *What do I fear above all things? What do I love above all things? What do I trust in above all things?* These questions are for self-examination. And whatever the answer to those questions is, that is your god.

When God calls us to fear, love, and trust in him above all things, it doesn't mean we can't still fear, love, and trust in other things. But we must not fear, love, or trust in anything more than the one true God. You can still be afraid of snakes, because they're creepy. But God can undo any harm a snake can do to you.

You can still love people. In fact, God *commands* us to love people. Loving our neighbors is actually the shape that our love for God takes. Love for God can be summarized in one word: "obedience." We love God by obeying his commandments, and most of his commandments are about loving our neighbors. What can you give to God that he does not already have? Nothing. God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does. And since God loves your neighbor, it is his will that you also love your neighbor and do good works for them.

And we can still trust other people and even certain things. Children trust their parents. Citizens trust police officers and firefighters. You trust your doctor. And this is good. We even trust material things, like seatbelts and food. And this is good. But we acknowledge all of these people and things as God's gifts to us, so we trust in nothing more than God.

So these three difficult conversations teach us the importance of having one God and following Christ no matter the cost.

In the first conversation, the competing god was the man's house. Houses are good. Living in a cardboard box on the street is not going to make you a better Christian. You can stay in your house for as long as God permits you. But be certain now that your house, or any other material possession, is not a god to you. Do not fear homelessness more than you fear God. Do not love or trust your possessions more than you love and trust God. Be certain of this now, because there may come a time when you lose every material thing for the sake of following Christ.

In the second conversation, the competing god was the man's father. Parents are good, and God commands us to honor our parents. Part of this honoring includes burying them when they die. In another passage, Jesus even rebukes those who neglect to care for their parents because they have promised their wealth to God (Mark 7:9-13). Since God has commanded us to honor our parents, part of following Christ means that we honor our parents. The point is that our parents should not become a god to us. There may be times when you miss something important for the sake of following Christ. One example of this is foreign missionaries. They have answered God's call to take the Gospel to farthest corners of the world. This is good, and most parents of missionaries are very proud of their children. But there is a cost. It may, quite literally, mean missing your mother or father's funeral. Children should fear, love, and trust their parents, just not more than God.

And in the third conversation, the competing God was the man's family. There is nothing wrong with having a family. God commanded us to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). Husband and wife are bound together until death (Gen. 2:24; Mark 10:6-9). This is God's will. No one should leave their families in order to follow Christ. In most cases, we follow Christ by loving our families, because God commanded us to love them. If a pastor says he is going to leave his wife and children in order to devote 100% of his time to writing sermons, we should fire that guy! That would be horrible! Or if a wife says she will leave her husband if he enters the

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seminary, we shouldn't even accept that guy into seminary. But sometimes following Christ means that someone may be estranged from their family against their own will. This is rare, but it happens. One example is what sometimes happens when a person converts from Islam to Christianity. They don't want to leave their family, and they try to show their family that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but sometimes the family disowns them. We are commanded to love our families, just not more than God.

These three conversations demonstrate the cost of following Jesus. It may cost you everything you hold dear in this life. God requires everything of you.

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God requires nothing of you, and he requires everything of you. He has made you his child through Jesus Christ. This cost you nothing. It cost Christ everything, and he was glad to offer himself for you. You have been baptized into Jesus Christ. Through this, God has adopted you as his child. He requires nothing of you to become his child. He requires nothing of you to remain his child. His love is unconditional.

And yet, he also requires everything of you. His commandments are good, and he actually expects us to keep them. When he commands us to do something good or refrain from something evil, he expects us to obey him, not because we need to earn his love, but because we are his beloved children. This may even include sacrificing things that are dear to us.

God requires nothing of us, and he requires everything, because he is our God, and we are his children through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.