

The commitment

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 9 and I'll be reading from verses 51 through to 62. When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And he sent messengers ahead of him who went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him because his face was set towards Jerusalem.

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? But he turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 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. To another he said, follow me. But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

[1 : 07] And Jesus said to him, leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Yet 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 his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. Ian, thanks for reading for us.

Let me add my welcome to Ben's and Happy New Year. We're coming back to Luke's Gospel. We were preaching through Luke's Gospel, I think, about 18 months or so ago.

We've returned to Luke's Gospel in our Bible study groups. And so we are doing so on Sunday mornings as well. Let me pray for us as we start. Let me start. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much. Not knowing what this year ahead or this decade ahead has in store, we praise you that your word is the lamp that we need.

[2 : 17] And we pray, therefore, this morning, please would you help us to be attentive. Please would you help us not only to believe what we hear from the lips of the Lord Jesus, but to take it to heart and be transformed by it.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Well, I've called this series Come, Follow Me, because that is, I think, the key issue as we look in these next four weeks at Luke 9, verse 51 to chapter 10, verse 37.

The issue is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and what it means to follow him. Perhaps you came to a carol service. Perhaps you're now looking in on the Christian faith.

Do keep coming. These four weeks, I think, will be really helpful as we see from the lips of Jesus himself what it means to be a genuine Christian. Well, for those of us who are following Jesus already, what better time of the year, the beginning of a new year, to see what Jesus says about genuine discipleship.

After all, the start of the new year, it's a time, isn't it, to look back? What did we achieve last year? It's a time to look ahead. What should my goals be for the next 12 months?

- [3 : 37] What should my priorities be? Indeed, not just a new year, but a new decade. Jesus will help us in these two chapters set our sights and priorities on the right things.
- And perhaps especially when many of us are very conscious of being so time poor. We're busy people. Many of us feel the stress of that.
- And we'll see that Jesus liberates us to fix our sights on what is of most importance. Now, remember, Luke is a careful historian.
- Just turn back to chapter one of Luke just so we can get our bearings. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we're told he is a doctor.
- In chapter one, verse two, he tells us he's interviewed the eyewitnesses, so it's not by some sort of process of Chinese whispers that we have Luke's gospel. In verse three, he tells us he's put together an orderly account.
- [4 : 44] This is no sort of children's scrapbook of things just cobbled together. However, in verse four, he's writing to give us confidence and certainty about Jesus, certainty we can build our lives on.
- And in today's passage, Jesus is simply saying this. If you understand, if we understand the times in which we live, then we'll understand the nature of discipleship.
- And I'll try to reflect that in the headings on the back of the service sheet. If you understand the times, you'll understand discipleship. Firstly, if you understand the times.
- Chapter nine, verse 51. When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. This marks the beginning of the second half of Luke's gospel.
- In the first half, the climax has been the declaration by Jesus' disciples of who he is. Chapter nine, verse 18. Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him.
- [5 : 52] And he asked them, who do the crowds say that I am? And they answered, John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. And others that one of the prophets of old has risen. Just as there's no shortage of people today who believe Jesus is a prophet or a teacher or a religious leader.
- The issue, of course, is was he anything more? Verse 20. Then he said to them, but who do you say that I am?
- And Peter answered, the Christ of God. They've got it. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He is God's king. Come to earth.
- And that leads straight into verses 21 to 22. And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed.
- And on the third day, be raised. And it's that journey to Jerusalem that Jesus now sets his face resolutely towards and which will occupy the second half of Luke's gospel.
- [7 : 06] So chapter 9, verse 52. What then happens? And he sent messengers ahead of him who went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him.
- But the people did not receive him because his face was set towards Jerusalem. Now, there was no love loss between the Samaritans and Jewish people in the first century.
- The hatred between them, perhaps as intense as that between the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip and Israel today. Unlike the 21st century, the Samaritans were not people you'd have phoned up if you were feeling suicidal.
- And so it's not surprising that in the face of such rejection, Jesus' disciples, James and John, respond as they do. Verse 54.

Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them? Now, they're not actually as gung-ho as we may think. After all, they've just witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus.

[8 : 10] Chapter 9, verse 28 to 31. Just have a look at it. Now, about eight days after these sayings, he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.

And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

They see Jesus in all his glory. And perhaps with Elijah in mind, they remember how in that reading which we had from two kings, Elijah called down fire on the messengers of Ahaziah, king of Samaria, when he refused to listen to God.

In other words, James and John's request here, when it seems to show a zeal for the honor of Jesus, backed up by a biblical example of something that's happened in the past, surely if Jesus really is God's king, now is the time for those who oppose him to face the judgment.

But instead, he rebukes them. Verse 55, now is not the time for judgment.

[9 : 32] Yes, there will be a time when those who reject him will face the judgment, but it's not yet. I guess it's rather similar to the are we nearly there yet question that some of us may have heard perhaps a good number of times as we travel to see relatives over Christmas and New Year.

To which the reply may have been something like, well, we haven't yet gone past that famous landmark that we always go past, we're then going to stop at a service station for a comfort break, and then we'll listen to another story, and then we'll be there.

In other words, various marker posts along the way before the final destination arrives. Well, in a similar way, there are a number of marker posts, if you like, that have to be reached before that final judgment day.

I've put Luke 24, verses 46 to 47 on the outline that Ben reminded us of earlier. As the risen Jesus says to his disciples, thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and the repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

That is the direction of travel, which means that now is not the time for judgments, but rather the time for gospel proclamation and invitation.

[11 : 09] And that will always be the case until Jesus returns. In fact, we see something of that priority in the verses surrounding our passage in Luke chapter 9, as he says to one of the would-be followers in verse 60, as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

And then in chapter 10, verse 1, as he sends 72 disciples out on mission. All anticipating the fact that the message of the forgiveness of sins for those who believe in Jesus will ultimately be proclaimed to the nations across the world.

Now, over the last couple of weeks, Radio 4 have been encouraging listeners to get in touch and say what they think has been the defining feature of the 2010s, the whole of the last decade.

I wonder what your defining feature would be. Some of the suggestions so far have been climate change, Donald Trump, Twitter, stroke other social media, Brexit and Netflix.

I guess if we opened it up then there will be a whole range of other suggestions as well. It is, of course, the issue of what defines the times in which we live. Well, how does Jesus answer the question?

[12 : 41] It's not yet the time for judgment. It is instead the time for gospel proclamation and invitation. That will always be the case until the final day when he returns.

It's why our mission statement as a church is what it is. Our overall purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

It's simple. It's focused because it reflects the simple, focused understanding of the times that Jesus gives us.

Sadly, churches often lose their focus. Good churches can lose their focus. We get too busy often with things that are good in themselves but aren't the priority. It's a mission statement that reflects the single-mindedness of the Lord Jesus as he sets his face to go to Jerusalem if you understand the times.

If you understand the times, secondly, you'll understand discipleship. Because back in chapter 9 verse 23, Jesus gives us his executive summary if you like of what it means to follow him.

[14 : 01] Chapter 9 verse 23, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. And we now see what that looks like in practice in verses 57 to 62 as we are introduced to three would-be followers, three would-be disciples.

disciples. And in a culture such as ours, where there's so much vagueness about what the Lord Jesus demands, it is vital that we take these verses to heart.

People often talk, don't they, about how they come to faith or the journey of faith they're on without really making it clear what they mean by that. Or we may talk about believing in Jesus, but what kind of Jesus do we believe in?

And believing what about him? We may even use the language of following Jesus. But what do we mean by following Jesus? Well, the key to understanding Jesus' reply to each of these three would-be followers is to remember the times in which we live.

Just as the year 11 student at school may occasionally need to be reminded of the times in which they live. This is GCSE year. There are certain implications that might potentially flow out of that in terms of the workload that is expected.

[15 : 33] Or the new mother. There are certain demands of motherhood, sleepless nights, exhaustion, and so on. Or think of the British Olympic team as they get ready for the Tokyo Olympics in the summer.

Once they've understood the times that there's just six months to go, then inevitably they'll be implications. Well, if we understand the times, we'll understand firstly that discipleship is costly.

Verse 57. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 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.

here is someone who is keen and eager to follow Jesus, but it seems he is too quick to promise. He hasn't counted the cost. Perhaps he's expecting that the life of following Jesus will be a life of privilege, status, and security.

After all, if Jesus is indeed God's Messiah, God's King, then that's what might be expected. But you see, he hasn't understood the times. Final judgment is not yet.

[16 : 50] The joy of the new creation is not yet experienced. Jesus is on his way to the cross. He's the servant king, the one who gave up his human rights and comforts, which means that Christian discipleship is marked by costly sacrifice and service.

If we follow Jesus, there will be an inevitable distance from the world around us. Perhaps the distancing of friends, where the relationship has cooled when they realize you're a follower of Jesus and what that looks like.

Perhaps the distance of a family member, perhaps a colleague who keeps their distance. Or it may be the cost of creature comforts, of not pursuing the same kind of lifestyle that those around us pursue.

Or perhaps just the willingness to move to a different area or a poorer neighborhood or a smaller house for the sake of the gospel and serving the Lord Jesus there. Just think of the many church plants.

It's a wonderful thing to think how many church plants there have been across London in the last 20 years or so. But all of them the result of costly discipleship, a willingness to move to a new area.

[18 : 12] To move house, to invest resources, discipleship is costly. Secondly, discipleship is a costly priority.

Verse 59. To another he said, follow me. But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father. And Jesus said to him, leave the dead to bury their own dead.

but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Now here is someone too quick to make excuses. Now there's some debate as to whether this man's father is simply elderly and he's saying in effect, I'm going to wait until my father has died, or whether the man's father is already dead and he needs to go and bury him, which of course would make Jesus' reply all the more shocking.

Now Jesus is not denying the responsibilities that we have to honour our parents into old age. But he is saying very clearly, and I hope we can see this, that following him is a greater priority than even the most pressing of family responsibilities.

Why? Well surely it comes back to understanding the times in which we live. Until Jesus returns, this is a time of gospel proclamation and invitation.

[19 : 43] And it's this, says Jesus, which is to be the top priority of every would-be disciple. Verse 60, as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Those who aren't followers of Jesus, of course, know of no greater priority than the priorities that the world places upon them. perhaps looking after elderly relatives or advancing their career or producing successful children or whatever.

But Jesus says there is a priority that is far greater. I was reminded just before Christmas of someone from a Jewish background.

She'd become a Christian, no doubt her family, hoping that it would perhaps just be a passing phase. Until that is, she married someone who was also a Christian, at which point on the wedding day, her mother came and said, farewell, farewell, cut off.

That was it. I think of someone else who sadly won't commit to following Jesus because they're worried about the tension it will cause within their marriage.

[20 : 58] Discipleship is a costly priority because proclamation is Jesus' priority. Jesus is warning us that it's possible to have a false sense of family duty that is incompatible with being a disciple.

I'll wait till my spouse becomes a Christian. I don't want to rock the boat with my parents. I'll follow Jesus but family will always come first. I'll put my children's activities before my willingness to serve at church.

My discipleship is a costly priority. Thirdly discipleship is a costly priority that demands great single mindedness.

Verse 61 Yet another said I'll follow you Lord but let me first say farewell to those at home. Here's someone else.

He approaches the Lord Jesus yet it seems he is too slow to commit. At first it looks similar doesn't it to the previous guy. I'll follow you Lord. First let me go and do something else.

[22 : 11] The giveaway of course is the word but in verse 61. I'll follow you Lord but can we see how very inconsistent that is?

You can't put those two words Lord and but together in the same sentence. Either we regard Jesus as Lord in which case there can be no buts about discipleship or we focus on the buts and reject Jesus as Lord.

Jesus' reply I think shows what the real heart issue is. Verse 62 Jesus said to him no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

It seems that this man both wants to follow Jesus and yet also he wants to hold on to his old way of life. Strikingly in the Old Testament when the prophet Elijah calls Elijah to follow him Elisha makes the very same request can I go home first and say goodbye and Elijah says yes the request is granted.

So why does this man in Luke 9 receive such a rebuke? Well presumably because following Jesus is far more important than following a prophet and the call to follow him is more compelling.

[23 : 41] I guess the plowing illustration that Jesus uses makes the point doesn't it? You need to set your sights firmly on a distant point to plow straight.

If you're confused by plows think of lawnmowers and straight lines if you prize straight lines and if you have a lawnmower you don't look behind you, you don't look around you, you keep straight ahead and you have a beautiful stripy lawn.

In the same way says the Lord Jesus there's no looking back a haunting reference perhaps to Lot's wife in Genesis chapter 19 who on being rescued from Sodom looked back because her heart was still there and she died.

I remember as a new Christian as a teenager being told so helpfully you cannot do the spiritual splits as a Christian.

To begin with it's painful as you go on it is impossible you cannot do the spiritual splits and I take it that's something we need to hear not only as teenagers but all the way through life as well JC Ryle comments it is impossible to serve Christ with a divided heart if we are looking back at anything in this world we are not fit to be his disciples very challenging words let me finish by addressing three groups of people firstly those who are not yet persuaded that Jesus Christ is God on earth perhaps like so many you view Jesus as a good man or a great teacher a religious leader but let me say I don't think you can read the gospel accounts such as

[25 : 43] Luke's gospel and simply think that because the demands that Jesus makes of people as we see here are far greater than any sane human being has the right to make of another human being say he's a demagogue say he's a dictator say he's deluded or say that he's God but what you cannot say is simply that he was something in between secondly those who are seriously counting the cost of discipleship I hope you can see that following Jesus Christ is not a hobby or a leisure pursuit it's not something to be kind of fitted in you know around all the other demands of life he is Lord Jesus urges us count the costs but then having done so not to delay and not to come up with a whole list of other excuses that may be a very timely warning to some and if you're conscious that you are in danger of delaying and you don't want to delay then

I'd love you to come and chat to me afterwards over coffee thirdly for those of us who do consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus Christ well for some I guess these verses may expose us actually we're not real disciples at all we've fooled ourselves we've fooled others for others these verses may be a timely warning not to look back but for others I guess a great encouragement at the start of the new year to keep on following Jesus Christ for another year for another decade as a costly priority with great single mindedness why because we understand the times in which we live let me lead us in prayer but he turned and rebuked them heavenly father we praise you very much for the way in which the

Lord Jesus helps us to understand the times in which we live this great age until he returns of gospel proclamation and invitation as the message of Jesus the forgiveness of sins goes out across the nations we praise you heavenly father for your great mercy in delaying the judgment day and we pray heavenly father for those of us who consider ourselves to be followers of the Lord Jesus we pray that our discipleship might be shaped by these times in which we live we pray for your mercy on us that you help us to follow Jesus in a costly way as a priority and with great single mindedness in the year ahead and we ask it in his name Amen