

Following Jesus This Year

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[0:00] Well, I wonder whom you're going to follow this year. Because we can actually follow quite a few different people or things in life, can't we? Whether it's a football team or people on Facebook.

You have Facebook followers, don't you? In fact, for the kids these days, there's even Instagram and Twitter. There are lots of twats on Twitter. There are there's following doctors' advice for medical things.

There's following a friend or even news from a particular paper. There's lots of people or things that we can follow this year. In fact, we can even follow our dreams like this guy.

People said, follow your dreams, so I went back to sleep. I like that. Anyway, of course, we know as Christians that the person we're to follow above all others is Jesus.

He is our King and Saviour. But each year I like to begin with one of the first books of the New Testament, which we call Gospels or Biographies of Jesus, because we get to meet Jesus face to face, as it were, as much as possible, which is always a good way to start the year.

[1:15] We started Luke's Gospel a couple of years ago, actually, but we're coming back this year at Chapter 9, and we'll follow it through to Easter. But we're actually coming back to a turning point in Luke's Gospel.

I know it doesn't seem like that. Chapter 9, verse 51 seems like an odd turning point, but remember the chapters and verse numbers weren't part of the original Bible. You see, earlier in the chapter, in Chapter 9, verse 20, the disciples finally figured out who Jesus was, that he is God's Messiah or Christ, King.

And then almost immediately, Jesus says in verse 22, that he must be handed over to the chief priests in Jerusalem to be killed. And then on the third day, rise again.

And just before our passage in verse 44, he says the same thing, though the disciples don't understand why he must die. But today, the time has come for Jesus to now head towards Jerusalem and die.

Though this journey to Jerusalem will take some time to get there, the journey will take the next 10 chapters of Luke's Gospel until Jesus arrives at the temple in 1945.

[2:36] Not the year 1945, Chapter 19, verse 45. Although along the way, and along the way, he'll face opposition and he'll teach his disciples what it means to follow him.

Today's two sections kind of set us up for next week, the mission that Jesus sends the 72 on, but they still teach us this week things about what it means to follow Jesus this year.

Like firstly, understanding the time. So point one, verse 51. As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

Here Jesus understands the time, doesn't he? The time has approached for him to be taken up into heaven. The time, as we say in our creeds, like the Apostles' Creed, for him to ascend into heaven and be seated at the right hand of the Father.

But before he is taken up, he must first be handed over to the chief priests in Jerusalem and crucified. And so he sets out for Jerusalem to go through this process first, to die before being taken up.

[3:51] And did you notice that he sets out resolutely? And literally, he sets his face towards Jerusalem. Setting his face means an act of determination. He's determined to go there.

I love this picture of a kid you may have seen before who's very determined not to be messed with, isn't he? And this one is very determined to win the race. But Jesus is very determined to head to the cross.

He sets his face to Jerusalem, even though he knows it will cost him everything, his life. Why is he going to do this?

Well, because this is his Father's plan to save us. As you know, his death brings our salvation, doesn't it? Jesus' death, as Peter said at the start of the service, pays for our sins.

That is the punishment for our sins so that we can be forgiven instead. And so the time for him to be taken up means, then, the time for our salvation.

[5:00] Which is why he not only sets his face towards Jerusalem, but also sends out messengers ahead of him. So in verse 52, he sent out messengers on ahead who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him.

Now, at a superficial level, these disciples are sent ahead to book some accommodation. You need to find out where the Airbnbs are or whatever it is. But Luke wants us to see something more here because you notice that these disciples, he calls messengers, doesn't he?

Verse 52. And messengers have a message, don't they? In fact, Luke literally writes in verse 52, and he sent messengers before his face, which is a bit of an odd expression, but it's an expression from the Old Testament originally.

It originally referred to Elijah in the book of Malachi, where God said, behold, I will send my messenger and he, Elijah, will prepare the way before my face, before the Lord comes.

And earlier in Luke's gospel, just two chapters earlier, Jesus said that was fulfilled by John the Baptist, who came before Jesus' face to prepare the way for Jesus.

[6:16] And now it seems the disciples are acting in the same way. In fact, later on, we hear that they try and call down fire from heaven, just like Elijah did in the Old Testament.

They're acting like Elijah. Or next week, we'll see in chapter 10, verse 1, where Jesus sends out 72 appointed disciples before his face.

You see, the disciples are now continuing this ministry of preparation for Jesus. And the way they prepare is by proclaiming a message. The message, as we'll hear next week, that the kingdom of God has come near to you because the king is right behind me.

Jesus is on his way. And then to do that, that the people might believe and be saved. The point is, the baton has been passed on.

Elijah to John the Baptist to now the disciples, who to go and proclaim this message, that people might be saved. Even these Samaritans, who were hated by the Jews, remember?

[7:24] I think Palestine and Israel today, they don't love each other, do they? Yet Jesus sends messengers to prepare even these Samaritans, that they might believe he is the king and be saved.

The time for Jesus to die and be taken up means the time of salvation is here. Which is also why Jesus not only sends messengers ahead, but does not yet judge.

Verse 53. But the people there did not welcome him or receive him because he was heading for Jerusalem. So when the disciples, James and John, saw this, they asked, Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and destroy them?

But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. I don't know about you, but I can get discouraged when I try to speak to people about Jesus and they just don't want to hear it.

Instead of welcoming or receiving Jesus as their saviour king, they reject him. I don't know if you've ever had this experience before yourself. Perhaps with some family members.

[8:33] Speaking of family members, I remember the first time I met Michelle's uncle. He found out I was doing Bible college at the time. I was very curious. He'd never met anyone in his life going to a Bible college.

And so he was asking me questions. And I thought, what a great opportunity to talk about Jesus. And so I asked him, have you ever thought about Jesus? And then he responded, oh, I need to go to the bathroom.

And almost ran, literally almost ran out of the room. I've never seen him move so fast then or since. He must have been busting, of course. It can be discouraging, can't it?

In fact, one of our nine o'clock members, I was wanting to invite a friend to this service. I lined it up. And then last minute, the friend cancelled. Had something else to do. It can be discouraging, can't it?

And sometimes it can be infuriating when people mock us or mistreat us or deliberately try and erase us from the public square or even from Australian history, which Christians have a lot to do with, actually.

[9:38] Fiona Patton is again seeking to remove the Lord's Prayer from the Victorian Parliament. Or people show such contempt for Jesus and his name. It irks me every time they take Christ's name in vain.

Or literally killing Christians in other countries. And when I see these things, part of me wants to call down fire from heaven and say, God, judge them now.

And yet Jesus, despite his rejection, despite not even being allowed to rent a room in this Samaritan village, it seems, he doesn't get discouraged or infuriated, does he?

He may shake the dust off his sandals as a warning, like the disciples will do next week, but he does not judge them. In fact, he rebukes his disciples for wanting to judge them.

He simply goes to another village, verse 56, and seeks to save others. And in fact, I don't think he even gives up on that Samaritan village that rejected him.

[10:41] Because later in Acts chapter 8, we read of the apostles who were sent out and they preached the gospel to many Samaritan villagers. Perhaps even this one. And so like Jesus, don't be discouraged or infuriated if people reject him.

Of course, the time for salvation won't last forever. For us, Jesus has already died. He's already ascended, taken up at the right hand of God. Hasn't he? And so for us, it's like we're in the extra time of a game, a sports game.

And we're in the extra time before the final whistle blows and judgment comes. And so do keep praying for friends and family who've rejected him now, that they might receive him, welcome him into their lives later.

And do look for opportunities for others that they might receive him. Following Jesus means understanding the time that now is the time for salvation and doing what we can to see people saved.

Secondly, it means accepting the terms and what it means to follow Jesus. Back then, it was following him along the road to Jerusalem.

[11:56] For us, it's following him in life, isn't it? And we see these terms through three would-be followers who are ordinary people like us. The word follow is used each time.

And each time, Jesus' response shows us what it means to follow him. And with Jesus, these terms, they're not in fine print. They're actually up bold right in our face.

He doesn't hold back. So have a look at the first one, verse 57 to 58. As they were walking along the road, as he's heading towards Jerusalem now, a man said to him, I will follow you wherever you go.

Jesus replied, foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. This first follower, I think I'd call him Mr. Unconsidered because he promises to go wherever Jesus goes without considering the possible cost, that he may have nowhere to lay his head.

Interestingly, Jesus has just been denied a place to lay his head in that Samaritan village, hasn't he? Though, of course, he did have other places to sleep, and we read that in the Gospels. And so what he's saying here, I think, is following him may cost us the comfort of a permanent home where we always have somewhere to lay our head.

[13:20] Foxes and birds have permanent homes. They have a den and a nest, don't they? Unless the tree's chopped down, I suppose. But it's usually a pretty permanent home. But Jesus had none in this world.

I don't know if you remember this Aussie movie called The Castle. It was all the rage a while ago. And in the movie, the father says, a man's home is his castle.

It's a place of comfort and security. But following Jesus can cost us our castle. For some, it's literal.

I've heard of those who've converted to Christianity and been forced to leave their family home. I know of some personally who've become Christians here in Melbourne and they are not allowed to go back to their family home overseas.

Or take missionaries like the deans who have left their home in Melbourne to proclaim the gospel in Timor-Leste. Or the 72 next week who will leave their home to go village to village to proclaim the gospel.

[14:25] For us, it may not be literal. It may cost us the comfort that we have in our home country, for example. The comfort of being acceptable because Christianity is becoming less and less so, isn't it?

Or it could cost us our job security. Andrew Thorburn, that's all I need to say. Following Jesus could cost us our castle in this world. Are we willing to accept this term?

Secondly, following Jesus means the priority of proclaiming him. And so verse 59. He said to another man, follow me. But he replied, Lord, first let me go and bury my father.

Here is Mr. Family Man and his request is quite reasonable, isn't it? Well, I think it's a pretty reasonable request. In fact, an honourable request.

And so Jesus' reply sounds rather harsh. Verse 60. But Jesus said to him, let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

[15:32] What about you? But this seems harsh to me, doesn't it? So harsh that some Bible scholars think the man's father has not yet died, but is elderly and may die in a few years.

And so the man, they say, the man's response is more of an excuse. But we're not told that, are we? And even if that was true, is not caring for the elderly an honourable thing to do?

I'm pretty sure some of our elderly would be going, yes. God tells us we're to honour our father and mother. We are to care for our relatives in need. And so this is not an excuse, I don't think.

It's not the difference between something bad and something good. I know it's the difference between something important, caring for your family, but something that's even more important, proclaiming the gospel.

Jesus is saying as important as family obligations are and burying a parent is very important, there is something even more so, proclaiming the kingdom of God.

[16:40] Because while non-Christians who are spiritually dead, they can still bury the physically dead, but non-Christians are unlikely to proclaim the kingdom of God, aren't they?

They're unlikely to do that. And proclaiming the kingdom of God means proclaiming the King, Jesus. And that's what saves people from eternal death. And so proclaiming, it's pretty important, isn't it?

Especially since now is the time for salvation. Which is why I think Jesus seems to highlight this particular follower. Notice how this time, the follower doesn't come to Jesus, Jesus goes to them.

He calls him to follow. It's as though Jesus deliberately calls him to follow to show, not because he's doing something bad, but to highlight the importance of proclaiming the kingdom of God.

For this is how people are saved. I've conducted a number of funerals over the years. And I did one just before Christmas. Many of you will remember John Miller, who used to come to this service, hasn't been able to come for some years.

[17:48] But he left some instructions for me. And he said, he doesn't mind what happens at the service, provided that the gospel is proclaimed.

That was his one big wish. For John, proclaiming the gospel was more important than any other funeral or family obligation. Now, he still loved his family and fulfilled his duty as a husband and father and grandfather.

We heard from them all in different ways, and they all attested to John's character in that way. He fulfilled his family obligations, and then some. But they also all knew just how important proclaiming the gospel was to John, because John knew this is what would save his loved ones from eternal death.

Following Jesus doesn't mean we neglect our family duties, but it does mean as important as they are, there's something even more important, doing what we can to proclaim the gospel. Before we saw following Jesus meant understanding the time and doing what we can to see people saved, well, here is one thing we can do.

See the gospel be proclaimed. Whether it's by living a good life so people ask you why and then you giving an answer. Don't forget the next bit, giving an answer. Or whether it's giving an answer for the hope we have.

[19:10] Or whether it's having our conversation seasoned with salt so that others want to find out more, they want more from us. Or whether it's supporting the proclamation of the gospel through elite missionaries and the like.

I think we'll come back to this next week, but however it happens, is proclaiming the gospel a priority for us? Are we willing to accept this term for following Jesus?

And thirdly, it means complete commitment. Here we meet Mr. Lookback. I couldn't think of good names, but anyway. Verse 61. Still another said, I will follow you, Lord.

But first, let me go back and say goodbye to my family. Jesus replied, no one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.

Now again, this man sounds like a reasonable thing to do to say goodbye to his family. But I think this time it is an excuse because this time he has already approached Jesus, hasn't he?

[20:13] He wasn't like the other one where Jesus approached him. Now he's already made the decision that he will go up and say to Jesus, I will follow you. And then he looks back to his family after already deciding to leave.

It's like he has second thoughts. In those days, farmers would use oxen, as you know, to plough the ground. And notice how the farmer, I think you can see it, has both hands on the plough and he's looking ahead.

Because if the farmer put one hand in the plough and looked backwards, then, you know, the oxen could wander off and your plough lines would go all over the field, wouldn't they? It wouldn't make you a very fit farmer, would it?

And so Jesus says, if you've only got one hand on the job of serving in the kingdom, if you keep looking back to your old life, it's not going to make you very fit for serving in the kingdom, is it?

You're going to be distracted and go all over the shop. In fact, you'll even put yourself in danger. J.C. Ryle was a great English bishop and he wrote, those who look back like Lot's wife want to go back.

[21:25] And that's why what happened to Lot's wife. That's why I think she was turned to a pillar of salt in our first reading. Not just because she disobeyed, but because by looking back, she wanted to be back in Sodom.

And she wanted her old life back, even though it was coming with judgment. She still wanted to go back, which I find amazing. And so God sadly gave her what she wanted.

The world's way of life can be appealing sometimes. You know, having Sunday mornings to yourself instead of coming to church. Spending more money on yourselves instead of giving. Complaining about others instead of forbearing.

Rejecting people who've wronged you instead of forgiving. Ignoring those controversial bits of the Bible instead of obeying. I mean, those are the kind of things that, you know, could probably sound appealing.

But following Jesus this year means not being like Mr. Lookback. Not looking back to our old way of life or a worldly way of life.

[22:27] For it makes us unfit for service in God's kingdom and could very well lead us to missing out on God's kingdom. Rather, following Jesus means complete commitment.

Are we willing to accept that? So here are the terms for following Jesus this year. That under, unlike Mr. Unconsidered, we're to consider the cost and be willing for Jesus to cost us even our castle.

Unlike Mr. Family Man, we're to prioritise proclaiming the gospel, doing what we can to see it go out. Not neglecting family duties, but having that as even more important. And unlike Mr. Lookback, we're not to look back to an old or worldly way of life, but be completely committed to serving Christ this year.

These are the terms for following Jesus. It's a pretty high bar, isn't it? When you think about it. But here's the thing. They are nothing that Jesus hasn't already done for us.

Jesus considered the cost and still set his face towards Jerusalem, didn't he? Even though it cost him his life, which was much more than his castle in heaven.

[23:39] And Jesus prioritised proclaiming the gospel even above his earthly family. And we read that in the gospels as well. And even to us Melburnians who rejected him, he didn't judge us, he didn't call down fire from heaven to judge us.

No, he sent others to proclaim the gospel to us. And Jesus didn't look back, but resolutely looked forward to Jerusalem, to serving his father, completely committed to his father's plan, even though it included his death.

You see, Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything for him that he hasn't already done for us. And what's more, just as he was taken up to glory, so too he'll one day take us.

We can follow all sorts of people this year, even our dreams, but none have done or will do what Jesus has for us.

And so will you follow him this year, understanding the time and accepting the terms? Let's pray that God would help us. Let's pray. Gracious heavenly father, we thank you for this rather challenging passage.

[24:50] and follow, we pray that you would help us to live in light of it. Help us to understand the time that now is the time for salvation and so doing what we can to see others saved and help us to accept the terms for following Jesus.

Considering counting the cost, even if it costs us our castle, prioritizing the proclamation of the gospel, even above important family duties, and also being completely committed and not looking back to an old worldly way of life.

Help us to follow Jesus this year, we pray, in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.