

The Path of Discipleship

Luke 9:51-62

February 15, 2026

We've reached a significant turning point in our study of the Gospel of Luke. We haven't reached the *halfway* point yet, but now that we've come to the end of chapter 9, we're moving in a new direction. About a year ago, we began our walkthrough of a section of Luke's Gospel covering Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Over the course of five chapters, from Luke 4:14 through 9:50, we've watched the story of Jesus and his ministry in and around this region unfold. We've taken some breaks along the way, but we've also covered quite a bit of ground.

This morning, we are setting out together down a new road. Luke tells us in 9:51 that,

"As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (9:51).¹

This verse serves as something of a road sign for Luke's readers that the way forward for Jesus and his disciples will look different from what has come before. Geographically, Luke is telling us that the narrative will now move toward events that will culminate in the city of Jerusalem.

But Luke also wants us to see that Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem with purpose. Notice again in verse 51 how it says that, "Jesus *resolutely* set out for Jerusalem" (9:51). If you're reading from the KJV, you can see a more literal rendering of verse 51 which says that Jesus "*steadfastly set his face* to go to Jerusalem" (9:51, KJV). But why was Jesus so firmly fixed on this goal?

Think back to a couple Sundays ago when we read about Jesus' transfiguration. We read that,

"Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem" (9:30-31).

That was the first hint we received as to where Jesus was going. But for what purpose? Certainly, Jesus and his disciples would continue to preach about the kingdom of God as they left Galilee, and traveled throughout Samaria and Judea. But when Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus on that mountain, the text said that,

"They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem (9:31).

In essence, Moses, who represented the Old Testament Law, and Elijah, who represented the Old Testament prophets, were pointing forward to Jesus' divinely appointed mission to be fulfilled in Jerusalem.

But what was this mission that Jesus was about to fulfill? Notice in verse 51 we're told that Jesus' resolve to set out for Jerusalem took place,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NIV Bible (The Holy Bible, New International Version, © 2011 by Biblical, Inc.)

“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven...” (9:51a).

This is one of those occasions where I wish the NIV didn't fill in the gaps for us in its translation. What Luke says in verse 51 is more accurately reflected in the ESV, which reads,

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem (9:51, ESV).

The phrase “to be taken up” can be understood in a couple of ways. Without a doubt, that Jesus would soon “be taken up” was a reference to his resurrection and his ascension into heaven, as the NIV indicates. But we should understand that the words “to be taken up” refer also to Jesus' coming death, that he would be taken up, or *lifted* up on a cross.

In other words, Jesus' resolve to set out for Jerusalem meant that his eyes were firmly fixed on the cross that lay before him. Remember, how Jesus said to his disciples back in verse 22,

“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (9:22).

But as Jesus sets out on this new direction with his face firmly set toward Jerusalem, his disciples will accompany him along the way. His mission toward the cross will be uniquely his, but every step of the journey from here on out will be a lesson in discipleship for those who would follow after him. So here at the start of this journey, Jesus begins to prepare his followers for the path of discipleship ahead.

As we work through the remainder of chapter 9, Jesus is going to provide three warnings to anyone who wishes to follow him as his disciple. These three warnings were meant for his original disciples who followed him on the road to Jerusalem, and they are intended for us listening to this message today who wish to follow Jesus as his disciple.

Remember, earlier in chapter 9, how Jesus defined what it means to be his disciple.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (9:23).

Jesus' disciples will not take up their cross in the same way that Jesus will take up his cross as the savior of the world. But, if we desire to follow in Jesus' footsteps, we who wish to be his disciples must be ready to deny ourselves and take up our cross.

Jesus' preparatory warnings come to us through three encounters with unnamed individuals that he and his disciples met along the road. Look with me at the first encounter, followed by Jesus' first warning in verses 57-58.

“As they were walking along the road, 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”” (9:57-58).

We don’t know who this person was, who said he would follow Jesus wherever he went. Though he was a real person, his pledge to follow Jesus is representative of many would-be disciples. He is eager to follow Jesus, so eager that he announces he would “follow [Jesus] *wherever* [he would] go” (9:57).

But Luke’s readers now know where Jesus is going. He has set his face toward Jerusalem. He is going to suffer, be rejected, and die on a cross.

Luke’s readers also know where Jesus has been. He has been through Samaria.

Look with me at the short passage that immediately precedes these three encounters, beginning in verse 52.

“And he [Jesus] sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village” (9:52-56).

If you were to travel from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south, where Jerusalem is located, you would need to go through Samaria, or at least, you would need to go around Samaria, if you wanted to avoid that region. If you’re familiar with the story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman found in John 4, you might remember that there was an historic feud between Jews and Samaritans, so that they did not associate with one another. It’s no surprise then that in verse 53, we learn that these Samaritan villagers would not show hospitality to Jewish travelers, especially those on their way to Jerusalem.

What this brief story illustrates is the point Jesus was making in verse 58. When Jesus said,

“Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (9:58),

he wasn’t emphasizing that The Son of Man lived a nomadic lifestyle on the road, like a rock star on a nationwide tour going from city to city. No, the reason why Jesus was, in essence, homeless was because the world wanted nothing to do with him.

In John 1, we’re told about Jesus that,

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11).

What this first encounter reveals, is that **Jesus prepares his followers for the path of discipleship, by warning them that those who wish to follow should anticipate a world that is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel.**

Folks, we live in a world that is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel. Jesus says in verse 58 that foxes have a home in this world, birds have a home in this world, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. In this world, the Son of Man is essentially homeless.

The world is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel. Just as the Samaritans in verse 53 did not welcome Jesus into their homes, so too is this world inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel. And lest we chalk the Samaritan's lack of hospitality up to mere racial prejudice, remember that back in Luke 4, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his own hometown of Nazareth responded in the same way. His own people were so inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel that they were ready to throw him off a cliff!

As Jesus' disciples prepare to follow him down a path of discipleship, they are warned that those who wish to follow should anticipate a world that is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel. Friends, if you intend to follow Jesus as his disciple, be warned that you live in a world that is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel.

Why? Because we live in a world that is in rebellion against its Creator. In fact, this world has embraced a worldview that denies the concept of sin, and rejects any notion of accountability to our Creator. This world has adopted a perverted form of worship that Scripture calls idolatry. This is a world that gives its worship to the creature rather than the Creator. This world is committed to a warped view of self-worth, where the individual is the highest authority, and only the self knows its true identity. Men and women are not seen as God's image-bearers, rather the individual determines for themselves who or what they are.

The first warning Jesus gives to his would-be followers is that in this world they should expect to feel homeless. If the world is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel, it will be inhospitable to those who wish to follow after him as his disciples.

But do not be discouraged. Though you may feel *homeless*, there is no reason to feel *hopeless*. Why? Because consider how Jesus responds to an inhospitable world. In verse 54, James and John's instinct is that the Lord should judge those who reject him and his gospel. Yes, all who persist in rebellion against God and reject the gospel deserve his wrath and judgement. But, even to those who do not welcome him, Jesus shows compassion and patience.

We are reminded in 2 Peter 3:9,

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

In the very next chapter of Luke, Jesus will send out seventy-two of his followers into this inhospitable world, and yet, he will tell them that “the harvest is plentiful” (10:2). The kingdom of God is advancing on the kingdom of darkness, and though many in this world will not welcome Jesus or his gospel, the Lord of the Harvest is patiently waiting for men and women everywhere to come to repentance.

With the first encounter in verse 57, Jesus prepares his followers for the path of discipleship, by warning them that those who wish to follow should anticipate a world that is inhospitable to Jesus and his gospel. Now look with me at verse 59-62, and we’ll consider the next two encounters and warnings together.

“[Jesus] said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 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 plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God”” (9:59-62).

Like the unnamed someone in verse 57, the two anonymous individuals in these verses, though they were real people, are representative of many would-be followers of Jesus. Notice the similarity between these two people. Though Jesus extends the invitation to follow to the first, and the second volunteers to go, both people caveat their commitment to discipleship with the words “but first.”

Let’s imagine that in the first case, a son has recently lost his father to death. His desire is to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship, *but first* he is obligated to bury his father. Let’s imagine that in the second case, a young woman has made the choice to follow after Jesus, *but first* she desires the opportunity to return home for one last goodbye. Both of these sound like reasonable requests. So how does Jesus respond to these two potential disciples?

His answer to the first in verse 60 comes off as a bit strange.

“Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (9:60).

On the one hand, Jesus’ response sounds a bit heartless. Was Jesus forbidding this man from attending his own father’s funeral? On the other hand, Jesus’ response also sounds a bit enigmatic. How can the dead do anything, let alone bury their own dead?

The key to understanding what Jesus was saying is revealed in the later part of the verse. Whatever it meant for the dead to bury their own dead was to be understood in contrast to the charge to “go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (9:60).

Similarly, notice how Jesus responds to the third individual in verse 62, to the one who asked to “first...go back and say goodbye to [their] family” (9:61). To this person, Jesus said,

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (9:62).

This statement is a bit easier to interpret. If it helps, substitute “lawnmower” or “snowblower” for the word “plow” here. The image is the same. If you’re pushing your lawnmower or your snowblower, and you keep looking over your shoulder at what’s behind you rather than what’s in front of you, you won’t maintain a straight line. Your pathway will veer either to the right or to the left.

Notice also in verse 62, that Jesus again is making a contrast between one course of action—looking back—and looking in the direction of God’s kingdom. What do these two responses—these two “but first” statements teach us about the path of discipleship?

Jesus prepares his followers for the path of discipleship, by warning them that those who wish to follow will be tempted to delay discipleship for the sake of their obligations and their attachments.

Before I unpack this point, let me remind you where we are in the narrative. Go back to verse 51. Jesus has resolutely set his course for Jerusalem. His disciples will literally follow him from Galilee to Jerusalem in Judea. Luke will narrate that journey from this point through the end of the book.

But figuratively speaking, Jesus will be leading his followers along a path of discipleship. As they set out on their journey, Jesus prepares them for what lies ahead. His own path will lead to the cross, and as he has already told them,

“Whoever wants to be [Jesus’] disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow [him]” (9:23).

What these final two encounters illustrate for us is that those who wish to follow will be tempted to delay discipleship for the sake of their obligations and their attachments.

What do I mean by *obligations*? These are worldly priorities we have that can delay discipleship by competing with kingdom priorities. By worldly, I do not necessarily mean wicked. What I am referring to are those priorities that belong to this world that can tempt us to delay discipleship because they can compete with kingdom priorities.

Like the man who said, “but first let me bury my father,” these worldly priorities can include, but are not limited to things like, family, marriage, work, and money. None of these are in themselves wicked pursuits. But Jesus’ warning is clear: those who wish to follow will be tempted to delay discipleship for the sake of their obligations.

What then do I mean by *attachments*? Like the person whose hand was on the plow, but their eyes kept looking back at what was behind, attachments can be anything that pulls us off course from following Jesus. Some of these attachments are good, the things we *love*. Some of these

attachments are evil, the objects of our *lusts*. Either way, Jesus' warning is clear: those who wish to follow him will be tempted to delay discipleship for the sake of their attachments.

In closing, let me leave you with this question: Church family, what are the obligations or attachments that may be tempting you to delay discipleship? When have you said to Jesus, "But first..." when he has called you to follow him? How might your obligations or attachments be obstructing your discipleship pathway?

Let's do a little introspective application by revisiting an old friend of ours—The Four Gs. You remember The Four Gs, don't you? No, I'm not talking about a quartet from the golden age of Motown. I'm talking about our church's discipleship pathway: gather, grow, give, and go. Walk with me down the path of discipleship and ask yourself these questions:

In seeking to follow Jesus, are any of my obligations or attachments keeping me from regularly and consistently gathering with my church family for Sunday morning worship? When have I said to myself, "Lord, I want to go to church, but first..."

As one who wants to become a deeply devoted follower of Jesus, are any of my obligations or attachments in the way of my spiritual growth? When have I said to myself, "Lord, I plan to join a Life Group, a Bible study, or a Sunday school class, but first let me..."

Every Sunday we remind the church family that giving is as much an act of worship and discipleship as is singing, praying, or reading the Bible. What obligations or attachments are preventing me from being generous with my financial giving? How are these keeping me from using my spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ? Lord, I want to give, but first...

Lord, as your disciple, you've commanded me to go and make disciples, both locally and globally. When I consider my obligations and attachments, where do I see obstacles in my way preventing me from boldly proclaiming the kingdom of God? Lord, I know I should tell others about you, but first...

In these three encounters, we've seen Jesus prepare his followers for the path of discipleship, by warning them that those who wish to follow will be tempted to delay discipleship for the sake of their obligations and their attachments.

I'm excited that we've finally reached the end of Luke chapter 9. But there are 24 chapters in Luke's Gospel, which means we've still got a long way to go. Regardless of how long it takes us, we know that the same can be said about the path of discipleship. No matter how long we've been following Jesus, we've still got a long way to go. The good news for Jesus' original disciples and for us is, Jesus was not expecting his disciples to have it all together before they set out on the road. Jesus was preparing them for the path of discipleship, which he knew would be a lifelong journey.

Let's pray.