Discipleship: The Cost, The Danger, The Example
Luke 9:51-62

Up until now all the action in this gospel has been taking place up north, in Galilee. But from this point forward Jesus starts heading south towards Jerusalem. And as he makes his way there, Luke is going to concentrate much less on Jesus' miracles, and much more on Jesus' teaching. You see, for these disciples accompanying Jesus – and for us, as we track their progress - this isn't just a journey on foot. It's going to become a journey of the heart – as Jesus uses their time on the road to bring home to them and to us, just what it means to follow him, what it means to walk in his footsteps.

And in this passage we get to see the cost, the danger and the example of discipleship.

The Cost
In v57-62 we meet three individuals who, one way or another come face to face with Jesus. Two volunteer to follow Jesus, one Jesus invites. But what's interesting is that we know nothing about these three other than what Luke tells us here. We don't know what their previous relationship with Jesus was, don't know what job they do, what their home life is like, how many commitments they are trying to juggle, or how much free time they have – all the stuff you might want to know to work out whether or not they should take up Jesus' challenge is left out. We don't even know how they respond to Jesus' final challenge to each of them. Luke deliberately leaves that hanging – because it's not so much about how they respond, but how will you, and I respond? If you were stood there, what would you say in response to Jesus' call?

Some years back we were on a walking holiday and we got hopelessly lost in a forest. Four young children, who were getting increasingly tired and grumpy and the light beginning to fade, and with my stress levels rising we hit a fork in the path. One path went that way, the other that way. Which was I to choose? Choose the right one and we stood some chance of finding our way back to the car before it got totally dark, choose the wrong one and things were looking bad.

And it is precisely life's fork in the road moments that shape our characters and futures - will I take this decision to be obedient to Christ, even though it means less money for me, or will I take the easier path? Will I stand up for truth and justice in my workplace, or will I keep my head down? Will I do what Jesus is telling me to do, even though it means I get mocked and my reputation suffers, or will I close his voice down? And what is going on in these critical moments is, 'will I follow Jesus or will something else take priority?' As I say, its those moments that shape characters and futures.

And all three of these individuals here are at just such a fork in the road: do they follow Christ or do they take the other path? In deciding what they will do, each one faces the cost of discipleship.

The first one faces the cost of comfort:
Now his request to follow Jesus is absolutely genuine: v57, 'I will follow you wherever you go' – that is what you call an unconditional offer, isn't it? No strings attached, Jesus – I'm ready to go anywhere and do anything for you. And

yet, judging by Jesus' response, this man hadn't considered the cost to his own comfort: v58, 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."

In other words, Jesus says to him and to us, 'Listen, following me is going to impact your lifestyle, it's going to impact how you live.' You see, this call to follow Jesus isn't a call to a life of ease and comfort, indistinguishable from the world around us, like 'accept Jesus into your life and you get to keep all the rest.' Put really bluntly, we can't fall in step behind Jesus and hope our bank balance comes out unscathed. And that's not a theology of poverty, as if there was anything inherently holy about being poor, that's not what Jesus is getting at here. But just as the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head, so it's about having an attitude of heart that sees ourselves, like Jesus, as strangers in this world: this isn't our permanent home, we're aliens passing through, and so whatever resources God entrusts to us in this life, we use and steward with our final destination in view.

Now, why can this kind of verse, and the challenge it implies, make us uncomfortable? Why might the man have winced when Jesus said it? Well, isn't it because, so often, that's where we put our security – in our comfort? Proverbs 18:11 says 'A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination.' In our thinking, our comfort, our resources, are our safety net, they're our security. And Jesus is saying, when you follow me, you need to find your security, your sense of wellbeing, of belonging, in me.

Yes, come follow me, but your comforts, these areas you make the security of your life are going to get challenged, are you up for that?

The second individual is faced with the cost of calling. Now, this guy Jesus called directly: v59, "follow me". But the man wants to do something else first. And what he asks to do is perfectly legit – he wants to bury his dad. Now, to leave a parent unburied would be scandalous for a Jew. In Jewish thinking, burial rituals took precedence over just about everything else: studying the law, temple service, killing the Passover lamb, observing circumcision, all came second to burying the dead. So, as excuses go, this man's was as good as they got. To a Jew, if ever a man had a reason <u>not</u> to drop everything and follow Jesus, this was it. But Jesus' response makes it clear that nothing trumps following Jesus and seeing the kingdom spread. In the list of your priorities, Jesus tells the man, following me and proclaiming the kingdom come first.

And Jesus tells us why: v60, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Anyone else can do the tasks for your dead father – but it's only those who know me who can tell others about me.

And this second cost of being a follower of Jesus, is the cost of calling: Christ may call you to do something you *want* to do, but at a time you *don't want* to do it, or even worse, the double whammy, something you *don't* want to do at a time you *don't* want to do it. And when that call comes, when you stand at that fork in the path, what do you do? Will you obey or will you say, 'Jesus, you know, the timing

isn't great right now… will you call back some other time?' But *what* he calls you to, and *when* he calls you to do it, take precedence over the rest. That's the cost of calling.

The third individual is faced with the cost of commitment. V61: 'I will follow you Lord, **but**… let me first say farewell to those at my home.'

Now, be honest, have you ever responded to Jesus like that? I will do it lord, but… I hear what you're saying God, but there are these other issues you don't understand. And if you saw things the way I see them, you'd know what you're asking me is out of the question.' You see, you can't really call Jesus Lord, and follow that up with a 'but' can you? If you'll excuse the expression, being a disciple of Jesus means you've got to kiss your buts goodbye!

And Jesus says to him, v62, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." You can't call me Lord and then say 'but', you can't take hold of the plow and think you can plow a straight furrow, all the time looking over your shoulder wishing you could be back in the warm farmhouse or mucking about with your friends.

One commentator suggests that this man's desire to go back and say goodbye, suggests he hasn't definitively, decisively cut his heart ties to his old way of life. He wants to follow Jesus but there's still this pull over here and he hasn't finally settled in his heart which one he'll choose; in fact he doesn't want to *have* to choose, he wants to keep a foot in both camps. When we were considering moving here from England we were trying to gauge where our girls were at with it all, and so we asked Hannah, who was 8 at the time, 'if one bus was leaving for Switzerland and one was leaving for England, which one would she jump on?' And her answer was beautifully honest: both, I want to go both ways. And that's the problem we face isn't it? We want the best of both worlds: to oscillate between following Jesus and nipping back to the world. And Jesus says, if you follow me, you cannot spend your time looking back. It's all or nothing, no divided hearts. That's the cost of commitment.

So Jesus never calls anyone to follow him under false pretenses, there is no small print hidden away: He's clear and up front. If we are to walk in his footsteps we must face the cost of comfort, of calling and of commitment.

But if those are the costs of discipleship, there is also a danger.

The Danger

And that danger is exemplified in the attitude of James and John to the Samaritans who refused to accept Jesus.

Back in March, England and France played each other at rugby, and just before the game Marc Lievrement, the French coach said, "We don't really like the English, and it's better to say that than be hypocritical. We respect them, well in my case at least I respect them, but you couldn't say we have the slightest thing in common with them. We appreciate our Italian cousins with whom we share

the same quality of life, we appreciate the Celts – [the Scots, Irish and Welsh], and their conviviality and then among all these nations we have one huge thing in common: we don't like the English."

Which prompted Tom Palmer, a member of the England squad, to say: 'Everyone hates the English.'

Well, the French and the English have nothing on the Jews and Samaritans. Your average Jew despised the Samaritans, and it was pretty much mutual. The Samaritans were this mixed race of Israelite and non-Israelite blood. And pure-blooded Israelites hated them enough, as culturally impure and compromisers of the faith, that if a Jew was travelling from north to south, or vice versa, they would take this long detour that would add days to their journey, rather than walk through Samaria.

But Jesus doesn't do that. He's heading south to Jerusalem, but he's avoiding no-one, because Jesus doesn't take detours around people, he goes straight for them. And he sends disciples on ahead to prepare the way for him. Now whether that was preparing the way by preaching, or just finding lodging for them all, Luke doesn't tell us. What he does tell us is that the Samaritans don't respond favourably to the visit.

And in response James and John offer to call down fire from heaven. They want to wipe the village out, Sodom and Gomorrah style. That's a great example of Christ-like love isn't it! But before we leap to condemn them, just ask yourself: what's motivating them? What's behind this suggestion to fry the village?

What's interesting for us, is that it's a passion, it's a zeal for Christ's honour. These guys are serious about their discipleship and they're zealous for their master's honour; they want to see his mission succeed. And all of those are good, wonderful things. But get this: in their passion for Jesus, in their zeal for his name and his fame, they have an attitude and, out of that, make a suggestion, that is repugnant to Jesus and in v55 earns his rebuke.

You see, the danger inherent in being serious about being a disciple, and serious about paying the cost of real discipleship, is how you treat others who aren't. That might be other Christians, who aren't as sold out or as zealous as you are, or non-Christians who by their lifestyle and activities oppose the gospel. And whilst your response may not be as dramatic as James and John's, still in your heart or with your words, at the least you look down on them and at worst you verbally blast them. Like these two brothers, you can be serious about following Jesus and passionate about the honour of his name and be motivated by a desire to see his kingdom extend and yet have an attitude to others that the Lord would rebuke.

And so the danger of this radical discipleship is that we forget who the real enemy is, and we turn our fire on fellow sinners who are in as much need of grace as we are. Now, that's not going soft on sin or compromising the truth, after all Jesus, more than anyone else, is clear that the Day of Judgment is coming. The decision these Samaritans and the rest of us make about Jesus is crucial and

has eternal consequences, but today isn't the Day of Judgment, it's the day of salvation and that is what Jesus calls his disciples to proclaim.

But there's the rub, you see if the cost of following Jesus gives us reason to pause, and if we are called to extend grace to those who, like us, don't deserve it, where can you and I get the power, the inspiration, to live like that, to pay the price and avoid the danger?

The Example

This passage opens in v51 with Luke telling us that 'when the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.' Despite knowing the cost that lay ahead at the cross, Jesus set his face to pay the price of obedience to his Father. He is the ultimate disciple, who considered the cost - of comfort, of calling, of commitment and kept walking towards it. And it's by walking in step with him, looking to him as our great example, that we can do the same. And it's through the cross and the resurrection, and the ascension and outpouring of the Spirit that follows - his being taken up - , that we can find the grace and the power to do it and, at the same time, avoid the pitfalls.

In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul links our generosity, our willingness to pay the cost of comfort, to Jesus' own willingness to give up what he had: 2 Cor 8:9, '*for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.' So it's not guilt, or a stick of 'you must', or zeal for zeal's sake, that should motivate us to the sacrificial generosity of discipleship but understanding how Jesus became poor for us and gave himself for us, that's what opens our hearts and hands, Paul says.

But it's also at the cross that we see how Jesus treats his enemies. When he's nailed to the cross, he doesn't curse his enemies, he prays for them. When he dies on the cross, he gives his life for his enemies. So as well being the ultimate example of willingness to pay the price, he is also the ultimate example of grace in face of enmity, of self-sacrifice in the face of hostility.

So Church, the cost of discipleship is ours to face, and the danger ours to avoid, but it's Jesus who provides us both with the example to follow, and the power through his Spirit, to live it out. Let's choose again to follow in His steps.