

Luke 9:51-62

I imagine that all of us have, at some time in our life, played Follow the Leader. Playing the game could be quite a challenge if the boy or girl in the lead climbed over fences, walked through mud puddles, or did other such things which made it difficult for those who were walking behind. What kind of follower were you? Fair? Excellent? Terrible? It often depended upon what kind of leader was out in front. But in playing the game, it didn't really matter all that much if you were a good follower or not; after all, it was just a game.

What about when it comes to Christ Jesus...what kind of follower are you? As we look at our Gospel reading for today, we're going to answer that question, and we're going to come up with two correct answers which apply to each one of us here. First we will see that each of us is a sinful follower, and then we're going to see that each of us is a forgiven follower.

The first man Jesus encounters was pretty bold, wasn't he? "I will follow you wherever you go." He was sure of himself. He was confident that he had what it took to follow Jesus over every fence, mud puddle, or obstacle in his path. But Jesus was not impressed. He looked at the man's heart and knew that the tongue in his shoe would never keep pace with the tongue in his mouth. He warned him about what he was committing to. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." He was telling him that being one of His followers was not easy. Jesus did not come down here to "party it up." He did not come to be served; to get the most out of life. Jesus came to live a life of self-sacrifice, and those who want to follow Him must also live that kind of life.

Being a Christian means putting others first, ahead of yourself. It means turning the other cheek to those who hurt you. It means loving your enemies. It means giving the first-fruits of your income back to the Lord. Being a Christian means doing the right thing even though your sinful flesh doesn't want to. It means making time each week to be in God's House and each day to be in His Word.

Did that man have what it takes to be a follower of Jesus? I don't know. But I do know the more important question is, Do you and I have what it takes to be faithful followers of Christ Jesus? Take a look at your own track record. How regular are you at coming to God's House for worship and Holy Communion? How much time each day do you spend in the Word and in prayer? How much of your income do you give back to the Lord? Do you do good to those who do not like you? Do you take God's Commandments seriously, or lightly?

The second man in our text said, "Lord, (before I follow you) let me first go and bury my father." It sounds like a reasonable request...except that Jesus was in town for only that day. If that man did not follow Him then, it would be too late. Jesus would be gone tomorrow. "Now is the time," the Bible says, "Now is the day of salvation." That man needed a Savior right then; not tomorrow, but today...and so do we. It's easy for us to procrastinate, to put things off which really call for our immediate attention. Waiting until April 15th to start filling out our income tax form. Waiting until the night before a test to begin studying. Getting up at the last possible moment to make it to work or to school on time. And with all of these procrastinations it may have worked for us. We're still going. It didn't hurt us all that much to put these things off until tomorrow. But to procrastinate with Jesus Christ can be eternally fatal. To put the things of God off until tomorrow is foolish. To enjoy the moment but disregard God's Word with the thinking, "I'll repent later...I'll go to church next Sunday...I'll open my Bible tomorrow" are not the thoughts of a follower of Jesus, but a follower of the devil.

The third man said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." But with this man, as with the others, Jesus did not accept his excuse. At one time Jesus said, "He who loves father or mother, son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me." To put our family before Jesus is not following Jesus, but Satan, for the devil does not care what is first in our life as long as it's not the Lord. Now Jesus is not telling us here to disregard our family. He is not telling us to shrink our love for our spouse, parents, grandparents, children, or grandchildren. But He is telling us that we must love Him first and foremost. The First Commandment says, "You shall have no other gods," and this includes our family, our job, our studies, our hobbies, our ballgames, and the like.

What kind of follower are you? The three men in our text were failures at following Jesus. They put other things ahead of Him. So do you and I. We must confess that we are sinful followers of Christ. We are not worthy of His love and forgiveness. But maybe you don't see yourself in this way. Maybe you can easily spot the lousy followers of Jesus all around you, but that's definitely not you. You are a good follower of the Lord. You're more like James and John, then, aren't you? They never missed church. They always read their Bible. They sacrificed much to faithfully follow Jesus. But Jesus had strong words of rebuke for them. When they passed through a Samaritan village where the people did not welcome Jesus, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven upon these people. Why should they be allowed to live and prosper? They refused to follow the Lord! Is that the kind of follower you are? Demanding that others follow Jesus as flawlessly as you do, and if they do not, to hell with them...literally.

What kind of follower are you? Repeat after me, "I am a sinful follower." We must all confess this of ourselves. But you are also, dear friends, forgiven followers. And the reason for this is because of the kind of follower Jesus was. His Father sent Him to our world to follow His will. And the will of the Father was for His Son to suffer and die for all of us. Your Heavenly Father did not reject you for your sinful way of following the Lord, for your many excuses. He turned a loving and gracious heart toward you and gave you a Savior to pay for your sins. And Jesus faithfully committed to following His Father's will. "He set His face to go to Jerusalem," our text says. He was determined to go there even though He knew it meant painful suffering and death for Him.

There is a beautiful illustration which brings this thought out for us. A little boy was told by his doctor that he could save his sister's life by giving her some blood. The six-year-old girl was near death, a victim of disease from which the boy had made a marvelous recovery two years earlier. Her only chance for restoration was a blood transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the illness. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

"Johnny, would you like to give your blood for Mary?" the doctor asked.

The boy hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled, and said, "Sure, Doc. I'll give my blood for my sister." Soon the two children were wheeled into the operating room - Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and the picture of health. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Johnny grinned. As his blood siphoned into Mary's veins, one could almost see new life come into her tired body. The ordeal was almost over when Johnny's brave little voice broke the silence, "Say, Doc, when do I die?"

It was only then that the doctor realized what the moment of hesitation, the trembling of the lip, had meant earlier. Little Johnny actually thought that in giving his blood to his sister he was giving up his life! And in that brief moment, he had made his great decision!

Little Johnny didn't have to die for his sister to live, but Jesus did. He died the death on the cross so that you and I might have life with Him now and eternal life in heaven! As Johnny committed to his

sister with a tremendous love for her, Jesus, in setting His face toward Jerusalem and the cross, made a commitment to follow His Father's will for your sake that is and always will be unmatched.

Dear friends, that is why we who are sinful followers are also forgiven followers - because Jesus was so faithful in following the path that led to the cross of Calvary. Find in that loving action of your Savior, the strength and the motivation to be a better follower of Jesus from now on. Amen.