

Unselfish Love  
Luke 9:51-62  
June 26, 2016

*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 toward 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." 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 plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Today's Old Testament reading tells us how God called Elisha to follow Elijah as a prophet. When Elisha hears God's call, he drops what he is doing and follows.

The Epistle reading explains how the living by the Spirit of God means that we are no longer ruled by the desires of our sinful nature. Consequently, as Christians, we are to show the fruits of God's Spirit by leading a life of good works.

The Gospel from Saint Luke recounts the stories of three people who wished to follow Jesus and the sacrifices that discipleship would require.

All three readings point to the fact that the life of a Christian is a life of self-denial, a life of unselfish love. Our service to our Lord must come first in our lives. Whatever earthly things stand in the way of our service must be put aside. Let's see how this truth unveils itself in our Gospel text.

Luke tells us that: *[Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem* (Lk 9:51 ESV). The phrase "set his face" means he firmly made up his mind. When Jesus started this trip to Jerusalem, nothing was going to stop him. This would be his last journey to Jerusalem. He knew a cross was waiting there for him and he would not be sidetracked.

The unselfish love of Jesus took him to the cross. The will to follow his Father's plan for his sacrificial death on the cross came from Jesus' immeasurable, unselfish love for sinners and his complete obedience to his Father.

Along the way, a situation arose. When Jesus sent some disciples into a Samaritan village to see about sleeping arrangements for the night, the Samaritans sent them back with a definite "NO." Samaritans and Jews were never on very friendly terms. Even though they were of the same race, petty ethnic differences fed a very deep-seated hatred.

Seeing the unfriendly attitude of the Samaritans, James and John, sometimes called the Sons of Thunder, asked Jesus a very unloving question: *Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?* (Lk 9:54 ESV). They felt insulted and they wanted to get even. How badly did they want to get even? They were willing to destroy an entire town, men, women, and children, over an insult. Is there ever any unselfish love present when someone is getting even?

Our text says that Jesus rebuked James and John. However, another Greek manuscript has Jesus saying: *The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.* It's possible that this manuscript is correct and Jesus said these words. If that's true, notice how Jesus' unselfish love for others, even unbelievers, cancelled out any insult or thoughts of revenge.

At this time, Jesus had come to call people to repentance, and to rescue them from sin and damnation. The time for Jesus to judge all people was, and still is, sometime in the future. Instead of punishing the rude Samaritans, Jesus just moved along to another town.

As they traveled down the road, Jesus was approached by three men, who wanted to follow Jesus.

According to Matthew, the first man was a "teacher of the Law." This man would have been well-versed in the Scriptures. He would have been familiar with the prophecies that spoke about the fact that God's Messiah would not lead a life of luxury.

The man made a very bold statement: *I will follow you wherever you go* (Lk 9:57 ESV). This man was claiming that no sacrifice would be too great, no hardship would be too difficult for him. He figured he could do whatever it took to be a disciple of Jesus.

Peter made similar claims of complete loyalty to Jesus. The night before Jesus died, Peter claimed: *Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away. Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!* (Mt 26:33, 35 ESV). We know how that turned out.

But following Jesus is no cake walk. Jesus warns the man: *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head"* (Lk 9:58 ESV). To follow Jesus would mean to live with no permanent residence. It would require constantly moving from one place to another. The work of Jesus is concerned with heavenly things, not earthly things.

Jesus wanted this man to know what it can cost to serve God. A disciple must put aside all concerns about having a beautiful home, a big salary, and earthly comforts. Even the Son of God, while he labored to spread the Gospel message, lived without these things.

The second man was called by Jesus. He said he would follow just as soon as he cleared up some worldly matter: *Lord, let me first go and bury my father* (Lk 9:59 ESV). This could

mean either of two things: 1) This man's father was already dead but not yet buried; 2) He would follow Jesus after this father died.

This doesn't seem like an unreasonable request. It's only proper to show respect for one's parents and to tend to family matters. Seen in that light, Jesus' answer seems rather harsh: *Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God* (Lk 9:60 ESV), but there is more here than what's on the surface.

Jesus is able to judge the hearts of people. He knows things we can't possibly know about people who could be workers in his kingdom. Jesus knew very well if this man was sincere about following or if he was just making excuses.

Sometimes the opportunity to serve the Lord is like many other opportunities in life. When it's here, it must be taken advantage of because when it's gone, it's gone. When there's a chance to proclaim the kingdom of God we must take it because we don't know if that chance will ever come again. There is an urgency about our work for God. Therefore, no earthly matter can be more important.

These words of Jesus should cause us to look into our own hearts. We must ask ourselves, "Do I want to serve Christ and his kingdom? Am I tempted to let human relationships and earthly needs keep me from serving the Lord with my whole heart? If I must decide between a call to serve Christ at once or some earthly duty which needs attention, which comes first?" Service to Christ requires our wholehearted and our undivided attention.

The third man offered to follow on one condition: *I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home* (Lk 9:61 ESV). "I will follow, but ..." But is an interesting word. Whenever you say "but," you cancel out whatever was said before "but."

This man seemed to be ready to serve, however, there was a personal matter which he wanted to take care of first. There was a personal matter that he thought was more important. This raises some interesting possibilities. Would he be able to keep his desire to serve Christ after he saw his relatives? Would they try to persuade him to stay at home?

Once again, Jesus was able to know this man's heart. Jesus knew this man was giving him an excuse for not following at once. His desire to see his family was stronger than his desire to serve the Lord. Jesus' answer: *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God* (Lk 9:62 ESV).

This man was like someone plowing a field. When you're plowing, the only way to plow a straight line is to look forward at all times. If you keep turning around to see where you've been, you will plow a crooked line.

When we serve Christ, as workers in his kingdom, we must always give that service preference over everything else in our lives. Sometimes Christian service calls us to leave our home, our friends, even our close relatives. This is never easy. Family

members may be hurt. They might even be angry and claim we don't love them.

However, we must remember that the work of Christ's kingdom must always be our first and most important service. The demands of others, even close relatives, should never interfere with carrying out the duties our Lord asks of us.

Some might find this message difficult. Some might reject this message concluding that these are unreasonable demands. By no means does this mean that we are to be rude and uncaring toward our neighbors, friends, and family. However, you must remember that whatever is the most important thing in your life is your god.

If the most important thing in your life is your friends, than your friends are your god. If the most important thing in your life is your family, than your family is your god. If God is the most important thing in your life, than God must come ahead of everything else.

The two main themes of all three of today's readings can best be summed up in the words of Jesus: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these* (Mk 12:30-31 ESV).