

# Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word  
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First Presbyterian Church  
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 9:51-62

*“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

(Luke 9:62 N.R.S.V.)

## Jesus Be Reasonable

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

A group of church women were visiting with Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa was telling them about her work with the sick and the outcasts on the streets of Calcutta, India. She told them about the difficulties, but she also spoke of the great spiritual rewards. She told them of the love, and joy, and fulfillment that comes from helping others.

One woman burst out, “You are so lucky, you are not married. You are free to do all this stuff. My husband is so unreasonable.”

Gently Mother Teresa pointed out that all Catholic nuns are married to Jesus. Then she added, “And Jesus can be very unreasonable.”

Today’s lesson from Luke points to the truth of that statement. Jesus seems completely unreasonable. First he refuses to send fire down on those who reject him. The disciples are fed up with the kind of rejection that they get in Samaria. They think a little fire from heaven will go a long way to leveling the playing field. But Jesus refuses to be reasonable.

Instead of turning on those who are rejecting him, Jesus appears to turn on the very people who are trying to be his followers. He rebukes his disciples. And then he goes on to give three would-be followers a hard time.

The first seeker says he will follow Jesus anywhere, but Jesus tells him how difficult the journey is going to be. Hardly what we would call an encouraging response. The second seeker wants time to bury his father first. Jesus appears completely insensitive, “Let the dead bury the dead.” And with the third seeker, who says he only wants to say a proper goodbye to his family and friends, Jesus appears impatient, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Again, hardly an encouraging response.

No doubt the disciples wondered why Jesus was being so unreasonable. That’s no way to win fans and supporters!

What would happen, do you suppose, if we started putting messages like this on our church sign. “Come die with us!” Or, “We have a cross that fits your back perfectly.” Or “Looking for a reason to suffer? Have we got a Savior for you!” Would sayings like that gain us lots of new members do you think?

Or would they go down the street to churches whose signs proclaim things like, “The church of friendly folks and warm hearts.” Or “Hurting? Jesus cares. A place of healing.” Or “You’ve got questions? We’ve got answers. Come join us.

So what is going on here? Why does Jesus seem so unreasonable?

First we need to realize that this is not a message for outsiders. Jesus did not waste energy on the Samaritans who rejected him. He simply moved on. Jesus reserved his passion for those who were already disciples, but who were in danger of forgetting what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I’m reminded of a boss my brother once worked with on the railroad. The boss was new and several of the old timers resented him because he wanted to do things differently than what they were used to doing. That morning the boss had sent a seasoned crew out to repair a section of track. They came back mid-morning with a whole list of reasons why they hadn’t been able to do what he asked of them.

The boss was not stupid, he knew they were bucking him, and he let them have it. He said, “I don’t want to hear excuses. Anybody, and I mean anybody, can make excuses. If I wanted excuses I could have hired anybody off the street and they could have made excuses. But you men are not just anybody, you are railroaders, you are professionals, this is what you do. When I send you out to do something, I don’t want to hear excuses. I want to hear that the work has been done!”

They got the point.

We could consider this text from Luke to be Jesus’ “no excuses” speech to us.

I invite you to look with me again at the three “would be” followers of Jesus and the excuses that they give.

The first seeker seems to come across as genuinely looking to follow Jesus. He is not asking for delays, or exceptions, he says, Lord, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus replies that discipleship is hard, risky, dangerous, and difficult. Jesus may have suspected that this seeker was simply holding his excuses in reserve. He may well have been the type who signs up with enthusiasm, but then drops out at the first sign of difficult. You know the type, “Yes, I know that I said I would help you, but you didn’t tell me it would take this much of my time. I just don’t have the time for this, please excuse me.”

Jesus does not promise that following him will be easy, he only promises that it will be worth it.

As disciples we are headed for the cross, for commitment, for sacrifice, but also for a meaningful life, fulfilling love and compassionate service.

Ron Hutchcraft, in his book “Yours for life!” Suggests that there are *two feelings which won't seem to go away, and we've all felt them. In the lonely moments, you know there's a relationship you don't have that you're supposed to have ... and you think maybe it's a best friend ... a boyfriend ... a girlfriend ... a husband or wife ... a close family. But every relationship leaves you with this hole in your heart where “Somebody's missing.” In a way, we spend our whole lives looking for that person.*

*Then there's the other feeling — “Something's wrong” ... with my world ... with people in my family ... with me. There's too much hurt ... too much “me first” ... too many masks. Something isn't right, but we just can't find it or fix it. Someone is missing ... something is wrong — but it doesn't ever have to be that way for you again. Your Creator is the end of the search for answers*  
....

*You were created by Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ. You won't be complete inside until you belong to Jesus Christ. The one relationship you can't do without is a personal relationship with the God who created you. God loves you very much, and he wants to be in a close and powerful relationship with you!”* (Ron Hutchcraft Ministries Web Site, Gospelcom.net. Retrieved December 19, 2003.)

You can't use the excuse that it needs to be easier. For God knows that we only grow spiritually when we are challenged and stretched. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it.

Now the second seeker comes on the scene and he does offer an excuse, but it is such an excellent excuse. “I'll follow you, Lord, but first let me go bury my father.” Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

It is not surprising to us that family was very important in the middle East. Just as family is very important to us today. Yet as Jesus points out here, family can be every bit as much of an idol as money, status, and power. God is to come first, even before family.

It might help to realize that it is unlikely that the seeker in this story was asking permission to attend his father's funeral. If his father was dead, he would have been at the wake with all the rest of the family and not out on the street. It is more likely that this young man is the oldest son in the family, and that he feels a family responsibility to stay home and keep things running as long as his father is alive. “In a year or two, or ten or twenty,” he says, “I will be free to follow you. But for right now, please excuse me, while I do more important things.”

Jesus says, there are no more important things than being my disciple. Now listen, Jesus is not telling us to ditch all our family responsibilities. What he is saying is that we can not use “poor timing” as an excuse. God's timing is always right and when God's call comes, we need to answer.

The real question is how can we serve God fully in the midst of family responsibilities? I was so impressed with the young couple that visited our church last Sunday with their children. They were from Michigan and they had traveled down here to Philippi to do some work for World Vision. They answered God's call to do this ministry and they brought their young children with them. There is surely some inconvenience involved, but think what a lasting impression this will make on those children about the importance of answering God's call. God knows that we have children, aging parents, spouses and other family, so we trust that when God calls us to do his work, he will also provide for the family members involved.

When Jesus calls, he doesn't want to hear excuses, he wants to hear, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

The third seeker comes to Jesus, and again he seems to be offering a reasonable excuse. "I'll follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to those at my home." Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

We might imagine that this fellow just wants to run down the lane, say a quick goodbye, give a hug and a kiss to his family and be on his way. But if that were the case, he would not have had to ask permission. Jesus was walking. This fellow could have slipped off and said that kind of goodbye to his family and easily caught up with Jesus again.

No, this guy is simply procrastinating. Following Jesus means making tough choices. We will always have other things that need to be done; other pulls on our attention. Can we make the tough choice and let loose of some things, or will we keep trying to stay on the fence, just a bit longer?

We know it won't work, but we are all somewhat guilty of trying to live a divided life. (As if we can be part time Christians) I want to share a piece with you written by Sam Keen, it is a bit long to read, but it makes a powerful point.

*You hear a lot about people trying to work on their spirituality, get in touch with their God. Some people seem to want to be as close as possible with the Lord. Not me. My relationship with Jesus Christ is strictly business.*

*He's my carpenter. Handled the addition we put on the master bedroom. Works fast, polite to the kids, doesn't work weekends. Technically, he's a carpenter/messiah, because of the dying-for-my-sins thing. Saying my sins is kind of weird; it's the accumulated sins of all of humanity, not just my stuff. I'm not ungrateful, but I also don't want to get that thrown back in my face all the time. The last thing I need is him trying to guilt me into bringing him lemonade when he's out on the roof.*

*If it gets too personal with your savior, things can get weird. Out of nowhere, Jesus will start dropping hints about maybe going bowling, getting a bite to eat after church. Next thing you know he's "just dropping in" every Saturday afternoon and inviting me to join his softball team, or go with him to wash the lepers. No thanks ....*

*Don't get me wrong, Jesus is a nice guy. We just don't have that kind of a relationship.*  
(Sean Keane, "My relationship with Jesus is strictly business," March 14, 2003, Zembla Web Site, [Zembla.cementhorizon.com](http://Zembla.cementhorizon.com).)

Keen's point is that lots of people try to hold Jesus at a distance. They are looking for just enough of a relationship to get them into heaven, but not so much that it will change them. Friends, Jesus loves us too much to allow that to happen. He loves us and accepts us just as we are, but he refuses to leave us where we are, drowning in our sins. He knows that we cannot go with God and stay where we are.

Jesus offers the kind of relationship that will give us abundant life, here, now, and forever. And he refuses to accept any excuse that would make us settle for anything less.

Luke's trilogy of discipleship drop-outs is hardly unique. The Bible is filled with people with piles of alibis - people who came up with all sorts of creative excuses for not serving God. Consider Elijah who said, "Excuse me, Lord, but my nerves can't take it!" Or Isaiah who said, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm not pious or pure enough." Jeremiah balked and said, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm too young." And perhaps the most prolific excuse-maker of all, Moses, said, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm too old - and besides I've earned my retirement." When the Lord shot down that excuse, Moses came back with, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm not good at public speaking." When that failed to convince the Lord, Moses finally trotted out the old, "Excuse me, Lord, but there are others much more qualified."

What makes all of these people heroes of the faith is not that they had such excellent excuses, but that, with God's help, they were able to move beyond excuses, to answer the call, and join God in his work.

Anybody, and I mean anybody right off the street, can come up with excuses. Even unbelievers can come up with excellent sounding excuses. But Christians are those who, with God's help, move beyond excuses, who answer the call, and join God in his work.

Amen.