

"The First Decision" **Luke 9:57-62**

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to begin this morning by identifying a serious problem. I will then go the text I read, Luke 9:57-62, and identify the source of that problem and its solution. That source and solution have to do with what I call "the first decision" and either not making or making it.

Please listen carefully to what I'm going to preach today. If you hear, understand, and apply it, your life and the life of our church will never be the same. It will change dramatically, for the better.

THE PROBLEM

Let's begin with the problem. That problem is the great disparity between what Jesus promises and what professing Christians experience. In the New Testament, Jesus promises that those who follow Him will eventually become an astonishing kind of person and live an astonishing kind of life. He gives us a glimpse of that person and life in The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. The problem is that most professing Christians aren't that kind of person and don't have that kind of life.

In Matthew 6:25-34, for instance, Jesus pictures an essentially worry free life for those who follow Him. But most professing Christians aren't experiencing that life at all. One puzzled person, for instance, told me that she has been a Christian for 20 years but worries as much now as she did when she was a non-Christian. *"Why is that?"* she asked.

The great apologist of the 60's and 70's, Francis Schaeffer, describes his own experience with that. In the preface of his book True Spirituality, he writes: *"Gradually, however, a problem came to me – the problem of reality. This had two parts: first, it seemed to me that among many of those who held the orthodox position one saw little reality in the things that the Bible so clearly said should be the result of Christianity? Second, it gradually grew on me that my own reality was less than it had been in the early days after I had become a Christian."*

What Schaeffer describes struck a chord with me the first time I read it years ago. I myself had looked around and seen that most professing Christians didn't have the kind of person and life that Jesus promises we would. And just as disturbing to me, neither did I.

That in turn caused me to ask the same question that the Christian who worries asked me, "*Why is that?*" Why is it that professing Christians and I aren't experiencing what Jesus promises we would?

The answer that I eventually came to was this. There's something wrong with Jesus and what He taught. I would never have admitted it then but that's what I thought. Jesus and His teachings just aren't adequate. Following Him just doesn't work like the Bible and He say it does. I was disappointed with Jesus, in other words.

And so are many others. Go to a Christian bookstore and examine the titles of the books on the shelves. You'll find that there's a whole subcategory of what Dallas Willard calls "Disappointment" books. I have one in my office. It's titled Disappointment with God by Philip Yancey. There are many others: Where Is God When It Hurts, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People and more.

It's true. Many Professing Christians are disappointed with Jesus. There's a great disparity between what He promises and what they are experiencing. And they blame that disparity on Him.

DISCIPLESHIP TO JESUS

But He isn't to blame. The source of the problem isn't the inadequacy of Jesus and His teachings. What is the source of the problem then? He tells us in the passage I read, Luke 9:57-62.

In it, three people have to decide whether or not to "follow" Him. That's the word that's used in verses 57, 59, and 61, "follow." That word shows what this passage is about – discipleship to Jesus.

A disciple of Jesus is someone who follows Him. That means, as I've said many times before, he or she makes and carries out the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. You can see

here that decision to discipleship is directed to three things.

First, it's directed to being with Jesus. When He was on earth, what that meant to His disciples was a simple thing. They went with Him where He went. They actually abandoned their families and professions for long periods of time and accompanied Him from place to place.

Since Jesus is no longer a bodily presence, we can't be with Him like that. But we can be with Him nonetheless just as vividly as the first disciples were. Our part in that is to direct our minds and bodies to Him in certain ways on a daily basis. Those ways include practicing solitude and silence, fasting, studying, praying, practicing His presence, and more. I'll explain those things in the weeks ahead.

The decision to discipleship is directed to a second thing – learning all that He says. Jesus teaches us in the Bible. He gives us the best information on the most important matters in human life. So, we learn that information. We do that by studying the Bible in detail ourselves and by sitting under the teaching of those who know it – for a lifetime.

Suppose that we're involved in a lawsuit for instance, either as a plaintiff or a defendant. Jesus gives us the two most important truths about prosecuting or defending lawsuits that we will ever learn, in Matthew 5:25-26 and 5:40. So if we study the Sermon on the Mount ourselves and hear what others teach about it, we will learn those truths.

The decision to discipleship is directed to a third thing – doing all that He says. We go into our everyday routines and live out what we have learned. That involves trying and training. We can do most of the things that He says. It's in us to do them and so we try to. But we can't do some of the things that He says. It isn't in us to do them and so we train to, which I'll explain next month.

Jesus tells us not to gossip, for instance. Most of us can do that just by trying to. He also tells us to receive criticism with joy. Most of us can't do that just by trying to. But we can do it by training to.

That then is what a disciple of Jesus is. It's a person who follows Him. It's one who makes and carries out the decision to be with Him in

order to learn and do all that He says.

THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

Now, that helps us identify the source of the problem that I've identified. That source is not making and carrying out that decision.

You can see that in the three people that confront Jesus here in Luke 9. The first wanted to follow Him but only after securing his existence, in this case lodging. The second wanted to follow Him but only after arranging the funeral of his father. And finally the third wanted to follow Him but only after saying good-byes to his family.

But Jesus wouldn't let them follow Him. I used to think that He was being hard nosed here. After all, what they wanted to do were legitimate, even worthwhile things. So He was being unreasonable and even cold, I thought, in turning them away.

But I realize now that He wasn't. The word "first" in verses 59 and 61 reveals why He wouldn't let them follow Him. It was because something else was more important to them than doing that. They did have a desire to follow Jesus. But they put something else before and above doing that – which made them "non-disciples" of His.

It's the very same way today. Many believe in Jesus and have a desire to follow Him. But something else is more important to them than doing that. That something else may be family, security, reputation, wealth, power, sex, work, or entertainment to name only a few. Whatever it is, they arrange discipleship to Jesus around it. The specific responses and choices that make up their everyday lives reveal a vital thing. They've put something else before or above being with Jesus in order to learn and do all that He says. So, they're non-disciples of His.

I speak from experience and painfully so. Throughout different periods of my life, others things were more important to me than discipleship to Jesus was. In the 60's in college, it was baseball and academics. In the 70's, it was a lovely young lady named Jill, eventually two sons Moses and Aaron, and running. In the 80's, it was practicing

law and running. And in the 90's, it was growing a church. In all of those periods, I arranged discipleship to Jesus around those things. The specific responses and choices of my everyday life made that perfectly clear. I was a non-disciple of Jesus in other words.

And that was the source of the problem I had. That was why I wasn't experiencing what Jesus promises.

Listen carefully to what I'm going to say. The promises of Jesus in the Bible, including abundant life, are for disciples of His. I've quoted the old song before: *"Every promise in the book is mine – every chapter, every verse, every line."* That is so true. Every promise in the Bible is mine - but only if I'm a disciple of Jesus. Which means that every promise isn't mine if I'm not. I know people don't like hearing that and preachers don't preach it but it's true.

So that's the source of the problem I've identified. That's why people don't experience the reality that Jesus promises. They have failed to make and carry out the decision to discipleship – before all else. They are non-disciples of His.

THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

So become disciples of His – this very day.

Notice what Jesus tells each of the three people to whom He talked. He tells the first in verse 58 to make following Him more important than securing his existence. He tells the second in verse 60 to make it more important than arranging his father's funeral. And He tells the third in verse 61 to make it more important than saying good-byes to his family.

He then sums it all up in verse 62, *"No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."* The flip side of that celebrated statement, the positive side, is this. Put your hand to the plow and don't look back. That means make the decision to follow Jesus. Then let nothing distract or deter you from doing that. Not family, security, reputation, wealth, power, sex, work, entertainment, illness, financial problems – nothing! Don't arrange

discipleship to Jesus around those things. Arrange those things around discipleship to Jesus.

Take what we call our devotional lives. Jesus tells us to practice solitude and silence, read the Bible, and pray daily. For most of my existence, I arranged doing those things around my life, which meant of course that I often didn't do them. During law school, for instance, I ran at 5:30 in the morning every day. But many days I didn't even do one of those things. I'm a disciple now though. So I arrange my life around those things. Those things now dictate how my morning and evening go. Consequently, it's a rare exception that I don't do them.

That illustrates what the basic thrust of verse 62 is. Disciples of Jesus make being with Him in order to learn and do all that He says more important than literally anything else in their lives. They arrange literally all of their affairs around that.

And that is the solution to the problem that I identified. I'm going to say something now that I'm absolutely, positively, totally, and utterly sure of. Become a disciple of Jesus. You won't have the problem of reality if you do. On the contrary, all that Jesus promises, you will eventually, over the years, experience and have. You won't read any of those disappointment books because they won't be relevant to you. You won't be disappointed with Jesus. You'll be thrilled with Him instead.

CONCLUSION

That's why I call the decision to discipleship what I call it. It's "the first decision." It's first in terms of significance. Deciding to be or not be a disciple of Jesus is the single most important decision we will ever make. It's also first in terms of sequence. It comes before all the other decisions and experiences I have talked about and will talk about in our First Things First Campaign. You and I cannot know and love God or have abundant life or overcome sin, for instance, unless we have first of all decided to be a disciple. So, decide to be a disciple. Why? Because it's not only the "first" decision but the "best" as well.