FIT FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Luke 9:51–62
Key Verse: 9:62

> "Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'"

What's the hardest thing you've ever done? It could have been academic, athletic, or musical. Maybe it was a work assignment, a construction project, military service, or even moving to a foreign country. Or maybe it was doing something emotionally hard, or even having a baby. Today we see Jesus doing something so hard for him: going to Jerusalem. Then he challenges three people to do something so hard for them: following him there. These teachings about following Jesus are always hard to practice. What does he mean? How can we accept what he's saying? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

We're at a major turning point in Luke's Gospel. In this passage, as he turns to Jerusalem, Jesus is teaching about discipleship. Though he's been serving crowds, his real focus has always been disciples. To understand the context, let's review what's been happening thus far. His ministry was so dynamic and exciting! First, Jesus called a fisherman named Simon Peter (5:1–11). He began by asking him a favor. Then he restored Peter's failure in fishing and helped him experience not only his power but also his love. Through it, Peter learned obedience to his word, ahead of his own ideas and feelings. From the start, Jesus was teaching Peter his Lordship. Peter's partners witnessed it all. Jesus promised, "...from now on you will be catching men." Then they all left everything and followed him.

Next, Jesus called Levi (5:27–39). Levi was a tax collector, which meant a traitor, an outcast, a failure. When Jesus said "Follow me" to a man like him, it was sheer grace. The Bible says, "And leaving everything, he rose and followed him" (28). Levi had already experienced that big money couldn't make him happy. To put Jesus first was radical, but because he was so gracious to him, Levi did it gladly. He made a great feast for Jesus at his home and invited many people like himself. Jesus knew they were all "sick" with sin, but still he went to be with them. He came to call them to repentance (32), to healing and a new life. In his grace Jesus made things joyful like a wedding (34). He said he came to put his new wine into new wineskins (38), meaning people who are open and ready to really learn.

Then Jesus prayed all night to choose the Twelve (6:12–16). He chose a wide variety of men and concentrated on teaching them. He taught them how to suffer joyfully for the kingdom of God (6:20–23), how to love (6:27–36) and how not to judge (6:37–42). He especially taught them how to build a spiritual foundation, not of talk, but of obedience to what he said (6:46–49). Soon, Jesus welcomed women he'd healed to be included among his disciples (8:1–3). He helped his disciples know the secrets of the kingdom of God (8:9–10). And he helped them see his main work: to sow the seed of the word of God, patiently, in people with honest and good hearts (8:11–

15). He taught that his “mother and brothers” are those who hear God’s word and do it (8:21). His disciples had the greatest privilege: to witness his teaching and preaching with their own eyes; later, they themselves became ministers of the word (1:2). Jesus entrusted his words to faithful men who would be able to teach others (2Ti2:2), men who’d learned from him how to rightly handle the word of truth (2Ti2:15).

Jesus also revealed more about who he is. Through a windstorm on the sea, he helped his disciples see that he’s the Lord of nature, God himself (8:22–25). Next, he showed them how, with his power, he could heal an impossibly demonic man, and how much he valued him (8:26–39). He showed his disciples how he would stop everything for just one nameless, suffering woman, and how, through faith, he could raise a synagogue ruler’s daughter from the dead (8:40–56).

Then in chapter 9 Jesus sends his disciples out to do what he’d been doing (9:1–6), to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He trains them to depend on him and imitate him, following his instructions. He challenges them to take responsibility and work with him in feeding the crowd. That event demonstrated his compassion and power to meet all our needs (9:10–17). After that, Jesus helps his disciples make a personal confession of faith that he is the Christ (9:18–20). Then teaches them the way of the cross, the way all believers must follow (9:21–27). The way of the cross is especially hard to accept. So he takes three disciples to witness his transfiguration on the mountain, to help them really listen to this teaching (9:28–36). Afterwards, he teaches them how faith can drive out demons (9:37–43a). And he again predicts that he’s going to be delivered into the hands of men (9:43b–45). Finally, when he catches them arguing about who’s the greatest, he brings a child and teaches them that real greatness is being the least (9:46–48).

Hearing all this, we might be inspired to be disciple makers like Jesus. But first, we’ve got to *be* a disciple. Being his disciple, first and foremost, is an invitation of his grace. It’s never something we deserve, and it always requires radical commitment. It means to be open, to listen, to learn and to act. It challenges us, at our core, to be changed. The end goal is to become like Jesus.

Read verse 51. “When the days grew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Why is Jesus going there? A little earlier, when he was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with Jesus and “spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (9:31). It’s kind of odd to put it that way: “accomplish” a “departure.” But Jesus’ departure was not just a trip. The Greek word is literally “exodus.” It points to Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. Like the Exodus from Egypt, it would bring us salvation from slavery, this time, slavery to sin. It’s even more miraculous than the ten great plagues that broke Pharaoh’s grip on the Israelites. Through his resurrection Jesus would break the iron grip of Satan on all people and give us eternal victory.

But how? Jesus had predicted to his disciples: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be

raised" (9:22). It means it all had to happen in Jerusalem. Luke's Gospel emphasizes Jerusalem. He begins in chapter 1 and ends in chapter 24 at the Jerusalem temple. Why? For Luke, Jerusalem was the place where God's will for world salvation would be accomplished, fulfilling all God's promises. And from Jerusalem, the gospel message would go out to all the nations (Ac1:8). God wanted Jerusalem to be the holy city. But in fact, it became notorious as the place that rejected Jesus. It was so hard for Jesus to go there, knowing full well that he would be rejected and humiliated so badly. So it says in verse 51 that "he set his face" to go there. It means Jesus had a firm, unshakeable resolve. He refused to be dissuaded or distracted. It's related to the repeated word "must" in Luke's Gospel (2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 22:37; 24:7,44). It was God's will for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, and he made up his mind to obey it.

What does it mean to us? Every believer needs to learn Jesus' spirit to obey God's will, no matter what the cost, no matter what the suffering. It's so different from the prevalent life philosophy to live for ourselves. But it's at the core of what it means to follow him. Jesus teaches this spirit through his own example.

In his determination, what did he do? Look at verse 52. "And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him." Originally the Samaritans were ten of the 12 tribes of Israel. But when the Assyrians invaded, they forced them to intermarry with foreigners. So they lost their racial purity and became known as Samaritans. They refused to go down to Jerusalem and worship, and instead, set up their own religion in their own territory. This is why Jews and Samaritans never got along. But Jesus wanted to go through Samaria and sent messengers to prepare for him to stay there on his journey. What happened? Look at verse 53. "But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem." Somehow these people knew Jesus was only passing through on his way to Jerusalem, and they didn't like it. So they refused to welcome him.

Actually Jesus was familiar with rejection. When he first started his ministry, he went to his hometown Nazareth, and even they rejected him (4:16–30). He knew his disciples would be rejected, too. So when he sent out the Twelve, he told them, "And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them" (9:5). Now, as they experience rejection, what do they do? Read verse 54. "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?'" That was way more than shaking the dust off their feet. They were full of anger and fury toward those who rejected Jesus their Lord. How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 55. "But he turned and rebuked them." Jesus doesn't want his followers to be hot-headed and emotional. He wants us to be patient and merciful even toward those who reject him. When we experience some kind of rejection, so often we're not like Jesus. James 1:19–20 teaches us: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." To be fit for God's kingdom, we need to master our anger.

In verses 57–62 Jesus encounters three persons along the road. And in each case, the topic is discipleship. Two men volunteer to follow him, and the other, Jesus invites. But Jesus

warns all three that discipleship is way harder than they think. To us, if anyone shows any interest, we gladly welcome that person. We tend to beg people to get involved. And as the old saying goes, “Beggars can’t be choosers.” But Jesus doesn’t do discipleship that way. Why?

The answer is in what he repeats here. Twice he mentions “the kingdom of God” (60,62). It’s the kingdom where Jesus is King (19:38), and it’s the kingdom that has no end (1:33). But how is faith in this kingdom related to following Jesus? Jesus says here that his disciples are to “proclaim” God’s kingdom and be “fit” for God’s kingdom. In other words, he’s saying that as his followers, our ultimate goal needs to be the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is repeated so many times in Luke’s Gospel and in Luke’s other book, Acts. The kingdom of God is also called “the gospel” (9:6; 20:1), the good news. This gospel of the kingdom has to be both our personal hope and our message to people today. But for this hope to be real in our lives, we’ve got to repent and truly believe it, and live like we mean it. The hope of the kingdom of God is so much bigger than trying to build our own comfort or success in this world. It’s so much bigger than trying to build or hold onto our own territory in ministry. It’s a kingdom with many surprising reversals (13:28). It’s a kingdom filled with all kinds of people, especially the outcasts and the humble (14:13,21), and with people from all over the world (13:29). This kingdom is what Jesus our Lord lived and died for, his real hope, his life’s passion. It’s why he’s so determined. Then what does it mean to live for the kingdom of God, practically?

First, sacrifice. Look at verse 57. “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’” What a promise! What’s going on? There’s little information, but maybe this man witnessed Jesus preaching or healing somewhere. In any case, the guy seems deeply moved. What does Jesus say? Read verse 58. “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.’” What does he mean? He’s saying, “Following me is a lot harder than you think. Are you ready to live like me?” And how did Jesus live? He was so dedicated to spreading the message of God’s kingdom, he didn’t settle down anywhere. He was constantly on the go. He poured his whole life into going through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing people this good news (8:1). He called his disciples to live with this same spirit of sacrifice. He tells them in 12:32–34: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Are we ready to live sacrificially so that we can spread the good news of the kingdom?

Second, priority. Look at verse 59. “To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’” It seems Jesus was calling him at the wrong time. How can anybody be expected not to bury his own father? Some think this man’s dad hadn’t really died yet, but was just old, and the son wanted to make sure to be there for his dad when his time came. In any case, the point is the same: this person has a different priority. Jesus upheld the commandment to honor one’s father (18:20). But for Jesus, part of the sacrifice we make involves making God’s kingdom a priority even over our beloved family members. Jesus says in 14:26: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters,

yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Is he telling us to abandon our families? Of course not. He's saying, in dramatic fashion, to make following him and spreading his kingdom our top priority, and our family's top priority. For Jesus, it's the most urgent matter. Read verse 60. "And Jesus said to him, 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'" We shouldn't be living as if there's no kingdom, as if the things of this world and people in it are everything. Instead, we should be living as if the kingdom is real. Are we proclaiming the kingdom as our top priority?

Third, wholehearted focus. Look at verse 61. "Yet another said, 'I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'" It seems like a normal and kind request. How does Jesus answer? Read verse 62. "Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'" Jesus seems so tough! But it's the right answer for this man. To Jesus, if we're going to follow him, we can't get distracted. We've got to give him our whole hearts. "Looking back" means having a divided heart. It means being more attached to things or people than to Jesus our Lord. Just like a farmer has to focus on plowing, or he'll veer off into all kinds of directions and make a mess, so we've got to focus on what God calls us to do. If we truly believe in the kingdom, we'll stay focused on serving it. Are you "looking back"?

Sacrifice, priority, wholehearted focus: are we really following Jesus like that? Is the gospel of his kingdom our real focus? Have we mastered our anger? Are we fit for the kingdom? May God help us repent and make a new decision to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. May we learn his determination to fulfill God's will for our lives. May God show us how to proclaim the good news of his kingdom in these times, with a new spirit of sacrifice, and real priority.