

Learning and Unlearning

Luke 9:51-62

As most of you know, woodworking is something of a “serious hobby” for me. I think my very first woodworking project was a Pinewood Derby car in Cub Scouts. In 2006 I decided that I wanted to learn how to make Windsor chairs, which use mostly hand tools (as opposed to power tools). So I went to a week-long chair-making class near Peoria, Illinois. There I learned how to make a bow-back Windsor (PHOTO), the simplest type of Windsor made.

In 2014 I went up to Boston to do another week-long, one-on-one chair-making class with a master chair maker. This was a bucket list item for me. By this time I’d probably made about 15 chairs, so I felt pretty good about my skills; I went up there thinking my skills just needed to be honed and tweaked.

But early in that week it became obvious that some of my skills didn’t need to be tweaked; they needed to be abandoned. I was doing lots of things wrong. For example, Pete told me, “Steve, don’t put a death grip on your spoke shave (PHOTO). . . use a light grip and let the blade do the work.” He said that “the blade needed to be sharp enough to cut wood and draw blood. . . if your tool is sharp, let the blade do the work.” The other day today, ten years later, I was in my shop bearing down with a tool and I remembered, “. . . no death grip. . . let the blade do the work. . .”

The point is that I needed to unlearn bad technique and then learn good technique. This is almost always true whenever we learn a new skill. That will ***certainly*** be the case as we learn to follow Christ. We will need to unlearn ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting before we can learn the ways of Christ. This is true at every stage of our discipleship, whether you’re just starting to follow Christ or whether you’ve been following him for decades.

That’s the theme of today’s passage, Luke 9:51-62: ***Learning to follow Jesus will require unlearning many things.*** (*assumptions, prejudices, and some types of logic*). In rapid-fire succession, Jesus confronts the wrong thinking of his disciples as well as potential disciples. If we are going to learn to follow Jesus, need to be open to the possibility that we (myself included) initially get almost everything wrong about following Jesus. . . and until our dying breath we will need to continue unlearning things.

Context. Earlier in Luke 9 we read that after the disciple told Jesus all the opinions others had about him, Jesus asked this question:

20 Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”

Peter was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ who would establish the kingdom of God and reign on the throne of David forever. What nobody understood was ***how*** Jesus the Christ would establish that kingdom. In verses 21-22 Jesus tells them:

21 And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, 22 saying, “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.”

Only after his resurrection would his disciples understand that the Messiah *had* to suffer and be crucified and be raised from the dead before he established his kingdom in full. After recording how Jesus had to go to the cross, Luke immediately records one of Jesus’ definitive statement about discipleship (following him) in verse 23.

23 And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

First, to deny is the “polar opposite” of to confess (see Liefeld, EBC, *Luke*, p. 923; see also John 1:20, 9:20, 12:42). If you confess that Jesus is Lord, you have to deny that you are lord of your life. And so you have to say “no” to any of your desires and plans that are at odds with his. This is at the heart of our unlearning: recognizing and turning from things that detract from following Christ.

Second, a disciple must “take up his cross daily.” Since Jesus would soon take up a cross (literally), those who want to be his disciples must also take up a cross (metaphorically). In that culture, as Leon Morris pointed out, if you saw someone carrying a cross, he was “on a one-way journey. He’d not be back.” Taking up your cross daily, means that every day you die to self in order to live for Christ.

Third, a disciple actually “follows” Jesus. When Jesus walked the earth people literally followed him around Galilee and Samaria and Judea. Since Jesus has returned to his Father in heaven, following Jesus means imitating him and learning to obey everything he commanded. Disciple isn’t slang for churchgoer or a “spiritual” person; a disciple is actually following Jesus as a student/learned/apprentice.

With that context in mind, let’s be open to the possibility that we need to unlearn before we learn. Today’s passage highlight three core things about discipleship: the destination, the opposition, and the cost of following Jesus.

The Destination. (*Luke 9:51*) In verse 51 Luke mentions Jesus’ ultimate destination. . . and therefore the ultimate destination for all who follow Jesus. Luke doesn’t indicate in these verses that the disciples “got it wrong” when it came to their ultimate destination; but the rest of Luke makes clear that that was the case. They didn’t understand that their ultimate destination was their heavenly home with God the Father.

The first half of verse 51 is easy to overlook, but it’s incredibly important for our discipleship.

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

The term “taken up” refers to Jesus’ ascension when he was “taken up to heaven” (NIV). Something that’s emphasized repeatedly in Luke 9 through 24 is that Jesus wasn’t merely going to Jerusalem and to the cross; he was going **back to his Father in heaven**. Significantly, earlier in chapter 9 Luke records that Jesus was talking about this very thing on “the Mount of Transfiguration” (as it’s called). Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John “up on the mountain to pray.”

29 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. 30 And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of **his departure**, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah about “his departure” (Greek = exodus) which he “was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” through his death and resurrection. His final destination was heaven in the presence of his Father. At the end of Luke 24 after his resurrection, we read that after Jesus “blessed” his disciples he “was carried up into heaven” (see also Acts 1:2, 11, 22).

Back to verse 51, Luke tells us. . .

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus resolutely decided to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Jesus was not an unwilling victim; he went to Jerusalem to lay down his life as a ransom for many. But after his resurrection, he would be taken up to heaven. Suffering would precede glory.

If you keep reading, you will see how Luke makes clear throughout his gospel that **following Jesus not only means taking up your cross in this life; it also means following Jesus to your Father in heaven**. Heaven is the most radically God-centered place imaginable. And in the new heaven and earth, all who know God through faith in Jesus will have glorious bodies akin to Jesus’ resurrection body. We will experience the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in ways we can’t even fathom in this life. That spiritual reality changes how you experience your time in this world.

Years ago I talked with a young woman in her 20’s who told me that one of her few experiences with Christians was in high school when a friend invited her to youth group. There she heard about heaven and hell. She was somewhat troubled. She went home and told her mom who told her, “Don’t worry about it. . . That’s just something that Christians tell their children to make them behave.”

To that I would say, “A thousand times, no.” That’s not the heart of God, nor the heart of a disciple. Scripture speaks often about our destination because it gives us perspective and fuels our perseverance. Why? Because (as Paul wrote in Romans 8), our sufferings in this life are “momentary, light afflictions” compared to the joy we’ll experience in eternity.

Verses 52-55 introduce the topic of opposition to following Jesus.

The Opposition. (Luke 9:52-55) Being more than a dozen people, Jesus and his disciples depended upon the hospitality of people in each village. Therefore, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus sent some ahead of him to find a place to stay. Unexpectedly, Jesus decides to travel through Samaria. There was great animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans were related to the Jews, but they rejected Jerusalem as the place where God should be worshiped. We read this in verses 52-53:

52 And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. 53 But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

We get the impression that the Samaritans in this village stereotyped Jesus as one more Jewish rabbi going to Jerusalem. Without knowing anything about him, they wanted nothing to do with him. Of course, they couldn't have understood that Jesus would be going to Jerusalem to die for their sins.

We see in verse 54 that James and John had the same animosity toward the Samaritans that they had toward them.

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?"

James and John had the attitude that if you aren't immediately receptive to Jesus and the kingdom he is establishing, you deserve a swift and brutal punishment. This visceral attitude to the opposition/rejection of the Samaritans was something they would need to unlearn. In response to their suggestion, Luke simply records:

55 But he turned and rebuked them.

Jesus' disciples needed to understand that he came to seek and save those who were lost - even those who were initially hostile toward him. Chapter 10 records Jesus' instructions to his disciples when people do not receive them. It's fascinating because Jesus says that a day of judgment *is* coming when it will be more tolerable for Sodom (a city that did experience fire from heaven) than for those who reject him. Jesus was saying, "There will be a day of judgment; but this is not that day. This is a day when my followers hold out the offer of salvation at great personal cost if necessary."

Significantly, Acts 8 records that a few months later the gospel was preached in many villages in Samaria. And many were delivered from unclean spirits and healed physically. Those Samaritans were certainly glad the disciples didn't call down fire from heaven!

Like Jesus' original disciples we will likely need to unlearn some attitudes toward those who oppose or mock or reject Jesus. Maybe you can think of a time when you've wanted to call down fire from heaven on someone (or on some group of people) who was antagonistic to the gospel and/or the church. As we often mention, the new

testament ethic is that we are to treat others the way God in Christ has treated us. The story of every true Christian is basically, "I was an enemy of God, but through Christ he made me his friend. And I am now part of his family forever."

And so, in this life our calling is to befriend people who are far from God, even those who might consider themselves his enemies. Of course, sometimes we do need to "walk away" and leave people to their own devices (see Luke 10:10-12). But in his wisdom, God only gives us a very limited view of what he's doing in this world (like looking through a cardboard tube); we have no idea what he's doing that we can't see. It may be that you are in relationship with someone who is very antagonistic toward Jesus and the gospel. . . but God is drawing that person to Jesus (John 6:44). . . and he wants to use you in the process.

As you go through your days and weeks, notice the thoughts and emotions you have when people express animosity toward Jesus and his ways. Be alert for things that you need to unlearn so that you can learn to befriend people who need to know Jesus.

Verses 56-62 discuss the cost of following Jesus.

The Cost. (Luke 9:56-62) Having been rejected by one Samaritan village, we read in verse 56 that Jesus and his disciples went to another.

56 And they went on to another village.

Along the way, they encountered three potential disciples. In each case, Jesus challenged them to count the cost of following him. These potential disciples would need to unlearn some core attitudes if there were going to learn to follow him.

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

This person made a very confident and unconditional commitment, "I will follow you wherever you go."

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."

This potential disciple needed to know that foxes and birds had something that Jesus didn't have: a place to return and sleep at the end of a long day. We saw in the previous paragraph that Jesus and his disciples relied on the hospitality of others for food and for a place to lay their heads.

Jesus told him, "If you are **actually going to follow me**, you need to be willing to forego the same comforts that I do." Of course, not everyone is called to a traveling ministry. But on a deeper level we're all called to sacrifice and lay aside comforts - not to prove anything, but simply because that's what is required to serve others. And that's what I see in so many of you. You don't have a death grip on your money or your time or your

spiritual/emotional energy. Instead of investing everything you have in yourself, you invest in the kingdom and in others. And you have no regrets doing so.

Jesus initiates the conversation with a second person in verse 59:

59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

This sounds like a very reasonable request to us; after all Jesus himself taught that we should care for aging parents (Matthew 15:3-9). But in that day, the process of mourning and burying a relative could take up to a year. It may have been that the man's father hadn't even died yet. This person is telling Jesus, "Yes, I will follow you. . . later. . . but I have higher priorities now."

In the same way we might tell Jesus, "Yes, Jesus, I will follow you. . . later. . . after I've sowed my wild oats, or after this semester is over, or after I graduate from college, or after my career gets established, or after my kids get older, or after I retire, or after I die." That lack of urgency betrays a weak understanding of who Jesus is. If he is the Christ, the Son of God, then he's worth following today.

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."

Jesus calls this guy's bluff and tells him that spiritually dead people could bury his father. But only a spiritually alive person can "go and proclaiming the kingdom of God." This man needed to know that there can be no higher priority than following Jesus. And as we saw in our study of Acts last year, following Jesus involves being witnesses - telling others about our experience with Jesus.

61 Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Of course there's nothing wrong with saying goodbye. But apparently this man's loyalty to his family was higher than his loyalty to Jesus. Instead of understanding the urgency of following Jesus, he was thinking more about what he was leaving than who he was following. Jesus told him that "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." If you put your hand to the plow and look back, your rows will be crooked. We read in verse 51 that Jesus had "set his face to go to Jerusalem"; he wasn't looking back. Therefore, those who follow Jesus should not look back either. Since he is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world, our highest loyalty has to be to him.

I think we need to realize that Jesus was doing these potential disciples (and us) a favor by telling them up front that following him will be costly. There's a principle that says, "What you win someone *with* is what you win them *to*." Jesus didn't win people with the promise of an easier life; if he'd done that they would have quit following him when

people treated them the way they treated him. No, he told them straight up, “I’m going to Jerusalem to be crucified. If you want to come after me, you will have to deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me.”

About forty years ago I heard a sermon about these three potential disciples. The title of the sermon was: “The Would-be Disciples that Weren’t.” That’s a catchy title, but we don’t actually know that they “weren’t”; Luke leaves us wondering whether or not they counted the cost and followed Christ anyway.

What I really wonder about is whether or not you and I will count the cost and follow him. I pray that each of us here today concludes, “Because Jesus is the Son of God who went to the cross for my sin, by his grace I will deny myself, take up my cross, and follow him through this life. And after I have suffered in this life, I will be welcomed into my heavenly home and unimaginable glory.”