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Requirements for the Road

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Last week my family took a road trip down to Orange County. I love road trips. Some people view road trips as kind of a leisurely, scenic drive to enjoy. I view road trips a little differently. I view them like a personal mission. Time is very important to me. And so when I take off there are certain requirements for the road. You have to have a full tank of gas. You have to leave when there is the least possibility of hitting traffic. You have to have food and drink so you don't have to stop in case of hunger. You have to have proper directions so you don't get lost. Now all of this kind of irritates my family because they have this idea that when you hop in the car the vacation begins and you're supposed to have a good time. You enjoy the scenery; you enjoy the conversation or the music; you stop for food. You have the opportunity to go to the bathroom. I mean, they're pretty demanding!

We've been studying the gospel of Luke and up until now most of Jesus' ministry has been located in the region of Galilee. The focus of his ministry has been miracles, which have shown his authority over disease, demons, nature and even death. But when we come to chapter 9, verse 51, we see that Jesus begins a very important road trip. It's now about six months before his death, and Jesus, knowing full well what is ahead of him, begins his journey to Jerusalem. In Luke's gospel that journey will last until he arrives there in chapter 19. So most of the gospel of Luke is consumed with this road trip. On the way, the focus will not be on his miracles, but on his teaching; teaching his disciples what it means to follow him, even to Jerusalem. I must say, in my defense, Jesus viewed this road trip with focused determination. And he wants us to see our journey that way, too. We're not on a vacation; we're on a mission.

The trip starts out with Jesus defining certain requirements for the road. What are the things that we'll need to get to our destination? What are the things such as traffic and hunger and scenery that might get in the way of us reaching our destination?

I. INSTEAD OF RETALIATION, MERCY

The first requirement sprang from an experience of rejection. Look what happens as he began his journey to Jerusalem.

“When the days were approaching for His

ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.’ And they went on to another village” (vv. 51-56).

Samaria was the most direct route south to Jerusalem. Since Jesus was traveling with a large group, he sends a few people ahead to prepare the small village for their arrival. This was a normal, courteous thing to do. But it says, “they did not receive him.” In other words, “You and your friends aren't welcome here, Jesus!” The reason is they were traveling towards Jerusalem. You see, Samaritans and Jews despised each other. The Samaritans were the descendants of interracial marriage centuries earlier between Jews and Assyrians. They didn't recognize the Jerusalem Temple as the center of worship. They set up their own temple on Mount Gerazim. They hated each other so much that normally Jews went the long way around Samaria on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. This would be like someone in Foster City refusing to go through Redwood City to get to Menlo Park because they don't like those Redwood City people. Instead they go all the way up Highway 92 to Skyline Blvd. and drop down into Menlo Park through La Honda! That sounds crazy but that's what they did. But Jesus doesn't buy into that. He wants to go right through Samaria. Remember in John's gospel how Jesus met the woman at the well and offered her eternal life? She was a Samaritan. He probably saw this as another opportunity for ministry, but they wouldn't have it. When they realized that Jesus and his disciples were headed to Jerusalem, they said, “They're not staying here?”

So James and John, appropriately nicknamed the “Sons of Thunder,” are ticked off. You can kind of understand how they might feel. Just a couple of days ago they had seen Jesus transfigured on the mountain and talking “shop” with Moses and Elijah. Now the Son of

God is gracious enough to want to stay in a Samaritan village and they turn him away. "Hey, Jesus, let's call down fire here and nail them!" Sounds like a reasonable request to me. In a sense, it's commendable because it comes out of a desire to defend Jesus. They even had an OT precedent for this. The prophet Elijah had called down fire from heaven and destroyed God's enemies (2 Kings 1). Why shouldn't they do the same? Even their faith is commendable. They actually believe that with Jesus' permission they could command fire to just come right down.

There are a lot of things commendable about this, but Jesus doesn't buy it. When it says that he "rebuked them," Luke uses a very strong word. Jesus has rebuked diseases, demons and even a storm, but now he rebukes the disciples. Perhaps they had forgotten that little sermon Jesus preached a while back. He said things like, "**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you**" (Lk. 6:27-28). They had forgotten that.

Jesus says that one of the requirements for the road is that instead of retaliation, you show mercy. Even when people deserve fire from heaven, you give them what they don't deserve – mercy and grace. That is especially hard to do when we feel like we're mad for all the right reasons and we know that our cause is in the right. When anger is mixed with spirituality, you have an explosive combination. It's so much easier to call down fire on our enemies than to call down grace and mercy.

Recently I was involved in a wedding. It was a ceremony in which I shared in the officiating with another pastor. I won't go into the details, but in the course of the weekend I felt that he did a few things that were completely out of line. Most people that know me would say that I have a pretty long fuse. But the problem is that once the fuse runs out, the explosion can be rather loud. I was really mad. And I was mad for all the right reasons. The last thing I wanted to do was call down grace upon him. But that's what I have to do. (I'm still working on it) That's one of the requirements of the road – instead of retaliation, show mercy.

In the next section, as Jesus and the Twelve head for another village on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus deals with three different people. The key word in all three encounters is the word "follow." Once again, the theme has to do with what will it require to follow Jesus on this road. We have seen that one of

the things we can expect is rejection, and that we must learn to call down grace and mercy on our enemies instead of fire, but what else is required?

II. INSTEAD OF A ROMANTICIZED IDEAL, DISCOMFORT

In the first encounter, Jesus deals with someone who seems to have all the best intentions. "**As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, 'I will follow You wherever You go'**" (v. 57). Now that seems like a commendable thing to say. What more could you want, right? It's just like that song that we sing,

I have decided to follow Jesus

I have decided to follow Jesus

I have decided to follow Jesus

No turning back

No turning back

Those are such great words. You would expect Jesus to pat this guy on the back; to put him in front of the church as a positive example of commitment. But look what Jesus says. "**And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'**" (v. 58).

This reminds me of the 13-year-old boy who wants so badly to develop huge muscles. He brought his dad into a sporting goods store, led him into the weightlifting department and pleaded with his dad to buy him a set. "Please, Dad. I'll use them every day." The dad said, "I don't know. That's a big commitment. And they're not cheap, either." "I'll use them, Dad, I promise." Finally his dad gave in, paid for the weights, and headed for the door. After a few steps, he heard his son behind him say, "What! You mean I have to carry them to the car?"

Jesus is saying that when you buy into the Gospel, a requirement for the road is not a romanticized ideal, but an understanding that discomfort and hardship are going to be a part of the journey. Notice he just talks about himself here. He's the Son of Man. Not everyone welcomes him into their home, so there are times when he has no where to lay his head. That's an amazing thought, isn't it? The creator of the universe humbles himself to the point that he has no where to sleep! Of course, the implication is that if we want to follow him we have to be ready for that. By the way, it's not that he NEVER had a place to lay his head. We know that Jesus enjoyed the hospitality of Simon in Capernaum as well as Mary and Martha in Bethany. There were times when people opened their home to him and he accepted that. But there were also times such as he just experienced that he was rejected and had nowhere to stay. When you sign up to follow him, you have to be ready for that. You have to be ready for hardship and discomfort.

For most of us here, the issue may never be having

no where to sleep, but it will be discomfort on some other level. It may be the discomfort of loving difficult people, or the discomfort of giving financially to the cause of Christ to the point that it really cramps our lifestyle, or the discomfort of just living out of step with modern culture, or the discomfort of sending a son or daughter to the mission field. On some level that matters, genuinely following Christ will inconvenience us. If it doesn't, something is wrong.

The great thing is that we're promised so much more than we could ever give up. Remember the story Jesus told about the man who was out in a field and stumbled upon a great treasure? Jesus says, "**For joy over it he goes and he sells all that he has and he buys that field**" (Mt.13:44). That's a picture of us discovering the treasure of the gospel. We joyfully sell whatever we have to, especially a little bit of comfort, to have that treasure. I'm sure you've heard the saying, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

III. INSTEAD OF DELAY, URGENCY

Jesus goes on and has another encounter.

"And He said to another, 'Follow Me.' But he said, 'Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.' But He said to him, 'Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God'" (vv. 59–60).

This time, he initiates. He approaches someone and says, "Follow me." The guy responds with what in that culture would be a very legitimate excuse for delaying. Some people believe that the father was already dead, in which case he's asking for a just few days to take care of the funeral. Others believe that Jesus would never deny him that. They say that the father was just elderly, and the son is telling Jesus he must wait until his father is dead and buried, which might be months or even years. Either way, in that culture, burying your father was considered a sacred obligation. If there was ever a legitimate excuse for delay, this was it. After all, the Bible tells us to honor our father and mother. And Jesus chided the Pharisees for giving money to the temple but neglecting to support their parents. Jesus can't be telling us to ignore our parents or our families, but he is saying that when push comes to shove, when the call of God and the call of our families rub against each other, the call of God comes first. There is something even more urgent than burying your father, and that's the work of the kingdom of God.

When my own father was 18 years old he enlisted in the army. After his basic training he was shipped off to

New Guinea and the surrounding islands of the Pacific where he fought on the front lines. While he was there, he received word that his mother had died. Of course his immediate response was that he needed to go home and be with his father, especially since he was an only child. But his request was denied. Now I know that sounds very cruel to us, but in the minds of his superiors there was something more urgent than being with his father and burying his mother, and that of course was the war.

Jesus is saying that there is something that can't wait, even a few days, and that's spreading the good news. Instead of delay, urgency! So let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead. If you're spiritually alive, the most urgent thing in the world is to get involved in spreading the life-giving gospel.

IV. INSTEAD OF DISTRACTION, FOCUS

The last encounter deals again with family. **"Another also said, 'I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home'"** (v. 61). This time Jesus doesn't initiate. Someone comes to him and wants to negotiate the terms of his contract. He says he'll follow Jesus but first he needs to go back and say good-bye to his family. This request seems rather minor. What's the big deal? Just let me go and say good-bye to my family. I mean, at least the guy is willing to follow Jesus; he just needs a minute to say "so long." And the request has biblical precedent. When Elijah saw Elisha plowing behind his oxen, he approached him and threw his cloak over him which was a way of calling him to be his disciple. Elisha accepted, but begged him to let him first go back and kiss his mother and father good-bye. Elijah let him do it (1 Kings 19:19-21). I think Jesus was aware of that and perhaps that's why he responds with his own analogy about plowing. Look how Jesus responds. **"But Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'"** (v. 62).

Jesus is saying two things here. First, he's saying that he's greater than Elijah. Going back to say good-bye might have been okay when it came to following Elijah, but when it comes to following Jesus, nothing can get in the way. Secondly, he's saying that if you want to follow Jesus, you can't let anything distract you; you have to focus. Here the issue is not being delayed but being distracted. Instead of distraction, focus! In that culture, if you looked back while plowing you would plow a crooked furrow. Those who are distracted from their focus on what God has called them to do; those who are constantly looking

back at what they might have missed out on, are not fit for the kingdom of God.

In this case, and the case before it, the source of distraction and the source of delay is what? Family. Family is not a bad thing; it's a good thing. It's a gift. The point is not that we should get rid of bad things. The point is that even the best things have to take second place to following Christ. There are few things as important in life as family. Scripture affirms that. But it is possible for family to be too important to us. It's possible to make family an idol. I love my family. They know how much I love them. I think you know how much I care about my family because I talk about them all the time. But I want you to know that it's also important my family knows that they aren't first in my life; they're second. My commitment to Jesus Christ is first. Does that mean that ministry always comes before family? Not necessarily. But when I'm half way across the world, and I'm missing an important baseball or soccer game, and I begin to wonder if this is really worth it, I have to remember that.

You see, because one of my goals in parenting is that I would raise kids who make ME second in their lives as well. I don't want to be first in their lives. I want to be second. Some of you here come to church for one reason – because it will help your family. Perhaps your marriage is struggling and you come here because you're looking for some help in that area. Perhaps you think it will be good for your kids to be exposed to the Christian faith. It will help them stay on the straight and narrow path. That's okay. But what happens if it doesn't help your family? What happens if your marriage still falls apart or your kids still go astray? Will you still follow Christ?

CONCLUSION

It's not the bad things that get in the way of following Christ; it's the good things. It's a loyalty to Jesus that becomes hotheaded retaliation. It's a wanting to follow Jesus wherever he goes without really counting the cost. It's desiring to take care of family obligations so much that the work of the Kingdom takes a back seat.

Do you know what I love about this? It's that Jesus exemplifies for us the very thing he's calling us to do. Go back to the first verse of the passage: *"He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem."* Jesus knew his time had come. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. Most of us would have gone in the other direction, but he set his face like a flint. Now look again at the last verse: *"No man...looking back, is fit for the Kingdom."* That which he calls us to, he did first. He was not looking back. He never looked back, even for good things. He set his face to go.

Everything that our Lord demanded here, he himself did. He called down mercy and grace for the very people driving the nails into his wrists. He didn't allow the fact that he had nowhere to sleep to deter him. Though even on the cross he made sure his mother would be taken care of, he put the call of God first in his life. When his mother, Mary, heard he was wearing himself out, she thought he was beside himself, and she came to him to try and stop him. When she arrived, he was still in the house with a crowd around him, so that he had no time to eat. She got a message in to him, saying, "Your mother and brothers are outside, wanting to see You." They were genuinely concerned for him – a good thing. Jesus knew why she was there; and he said, *"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? It's those that do the will of my Father."* Even a good thing like the tender concern of his mother, when it would hinder him, was set aside.

It's easy to shake off bad things. But on this road to Jerusalem Jesus requires that we shake off good things. And that's the hard part. Even the best things have to take second place to following Christ.