PARABLES

The Cost of Discipleship: The Fox, the Funeral and the Furrow

Luke 9:57-62

The text of the parable

And as they were going along the road

A	***"A man said to Him,***	
	'I will follow you	FOLLOW
	wherever you go'.	GO
	and Jesus said to him,	The COST too high?
	'***Foxes have holes***	
	and the birds of the air have roosts	The parable
	but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' "	
B	***"To another He said,***	
	'Follow Me!' `	FOLLOW
	But he said, 'Lord, let me go first	GO
	to bury my father.'	COST
	But he said to him,	
	'Leave the dead to bury their own dead	COST
	But you go	GO
	And proclaim <u>the Kingdom of God</u>.' "	FOLLOW
A*	***"And another said,***	
	'I will follow you, Lord,	FOLLOW
	But first let me go and take leave of those at my home.'	GO
	and Jesus said,	COST too high?
	'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is of any use in <u>the Kingdom of God</u>.' "	The parable

Introduction

These three brief dialogues are not usually included in discussions of the parables. Three types of people come into the presence of the Lord Jesus. They are attracted to Him. Two of them want to become part of the group of His followers. There are two parabolic sayings. The trilogy illustrates the parabolic method of illustration used by the Lord Jesus.

It is a three stanza 'poem'. In stanza **A** and **A*** the would-be disciple is a **volunteer**. In stanza **B** the would-be volunteer is **recruited**. In both **A** and **A*** the imagery comes from the outdoor farming practices of the Palestinian countryside.

The flow of ideas is FOLLOW + GO + a parable. **B** has no parable. It is a direct command, but the imagery is from typical 1st century village society. This stanza is an inverted parallelism: Follow - Go - Cost + Cost - Go - Follow/proclaim.

The First Dialogue: The Fox

This parable has no cultural difficulties, but there are two levels of meaning.

The natural history meaning

The first would-be disciple wants to join the community of the disciples. No one recruits him. He offers his services to the Lord Jesus. He makes a good decision for the Lord Jesus is the only way to salvation. He also makes an unconditional offer of obedience. This is great! Don't let's speak disrespectfully of him. At least in the realm of his emotions, this man had been captured by his admiration of the Lord Jesus. Was he being impulsive? I like him for it if he was; so many lack impulsiveness. They never dare to say great things like this to Jesus.
He represents what is meant to be the centripetal force of the church. Yet his understanding of what is involved is shallow for he hasn't taken into account that there is a cost involved.

He doesn't understand that 'to follow' means following a rejected, suffering Son of Man!
In Dan. 7:14 the Son of Man is to have world dominion, great glory and a kingdom – all peoples, nations and languages will serve Him. Perhaps this man really believed that Jesus was going to Jerusalem and then the Messianic reign would begin. If so, serving the King Messiah would be all pleasure and smooth sailing.

In this same chapter (9:22), the Lord Jesus had said, "***The Son of Man must suffer!"*** This volunteer isn't given any graphic details, but he is given a picture of total rejection. The point the Lord Jesus is making is: "Have you considered that, if you follow me, you too will suffer deprivation? Whatever your **motives** are in wanting to become My disciple, realise that you are following a **rejected** leader."

['Roosts' is a better translation than nests. Birds always have roosts, but they only build nests at certain times of the year. The point is that even animals and birds have some place to rest, but the Son of Man has none.]

In effect, the Lord Jesus was saying that He was not there to stay as He was only passing through this world. If the volunteer wanted to follow him, he too should have this attitude. Ahead of the Lord Jesus lay suffering and the Cross. All who are followers of the Lord Jesus must take into account the probability of being despised and afflicted d like their Master. He wants us to realise that there is a battle to be fought and a race to be run. There is a work to be done and many hard things to endure if we propose to follow Him.

The political symbolism

In situations where a foreign power is ruling your land, where there is tight security or in the case of an absolute state like North Korea, there is a tendency by the oppressed people to develop a code or symbols.

The terrors of the Herodian era with its torture and murder were fresh in the minds of all. No one (except the zealots) dared to criticise Rome. The Romans and their Herodian supporters had spies everywhere.

Herod's family originally came from southern Palestine – Idumeia – where there was a racial mixture of Edomites and Jews, but the Jewish population always saw it as "foreign". In the inter-testamental period, Gentile nations were known as 'foxes'. The Lord Jesus called Herod Antipas ***"that fox"***. (Lk. 13:32)

Usually in western commentaries the political overtones of the sayings of Jesus are overlooked. Anyone living in Israel/Arab World today knows that every religious word has huge political overtones. The simple word "Messiah" had explosive meanings – then and now.

Perhaps, what the Lord Jesus is saying in a veiled fashion is: "Look, if you want power, influence and wealth, go to the 'birds' (the Gentiles) who 'feather their nests' everywhere. Follow 'the fox' who manages his own affairs with considerable cunning. For in spite of your expectations,

the Son of Man is alone and will be rejected. Are you serious in wanting to follow Me – a rejected Son of Man?"

[**Note:** the Christological affirmation is clear. Jesus is the Son of Man and in the Old Testament this title is clearly Messianic and is a higher title than the title 'Son of God'!]

We are not told how the volunteer answered. The parable is left suspended! Did the volunteer ***"set his face like a flint"*** (Is. 50:7) and follow Jesus or was he stunned at the price to be paid and stepped back and let the Lord Jesus pass out of his life?

Clearly this volunteer represents those down through history who have glibly offered to follow the Lord Jesus with no serious reflection on following in the steps of a suffering, rejected Master.

Lessons

1. Would-be disciples of the Lord Jesus at times fail to consider seriously the cost of discipleship.
2. Jesus is the Son of Man, but He doesn't fulfil His ministry in power and in successful acclaim – rather in rejection and humiliation.
3. Would-be disciples are not accepted until they have consciously decided to pay the price of following a rejected leader. He is ready to give us salvation without money and without price. He promises grace on the way and glory at the end. But the Lord Jesus would not have us ignorant that we will have deadly enemies – the world, the flesh and the devil. Many will hate us, slander us and persecute us if we do become His disciples. He doesn't want to discourage us, but He does want us to know the truth. Don't let us join the army just because we like the uniform and the parades and other ceremonial activities. No! Being a soldier means warring and wounds – conflicts that must be endured and won.
4. There is a **centripetal** force in the church and in mission. Some disciples are attracted into the company of the faithful.

The Second Dialogue: The Funeral

The second would-be disciple doesn't volunteer. He is **recruited**. This is the **centrifugal** force in evangelism and mission. This man was probably just standing by the road watching the Lord Jesus and the other disciples pass by.

The Greek tense in ***"Follow me"*** is the aorist/an imperative, indicating a command to start a new action. So this person hasn't been following and he is commanded to do so. The Lord Jesus doesn't promise him anything or warn him about anything. He simply calls the man to follow Him.

To do so means that a person ceases to plan his own life or follow other people's plans for his life, but simply leaves the matter to the Lord Jesus. There must have been a particular quality about this man that the Lord Jesus wanted him to join Him immediately. It was a call to the highest and most beautiful of all of earth's possible obligations.

In Middle East culture, ***"Let me go and bury my father"*** implies that the recruit is looking far into the future. He wants to postpone following the Lord Jesus to a time after the death of his father. Why? If his father had just recently died, then he would be in the house with the family preparing everything for the burial that often takes place within 24 hours due to lack of refrigeration.

The phrase "to bury one's father" is a traditional idiom that refers specifically to the duty of a son (usually the eldest) to remain at home and care for his parents until they are laid to rest respectfully. This is a big issue today in relationship to emigration – work in the Gulf or the USA, Canada, Australia etc. The oldest brother will be asked, "Are you not going to bury your father

first?" [The son is in his 20s; the father is in his 40s and is expected to live for another 20-30 years.] So the phrase really means: "Are you not going to stay until you have fulfilled your traditional duty of taking care of your parents until their death and then consider emigrating?"

In the colloquial language of the Middle East, when a rebellious son tries to assert his independence from his father, the father's stinging rebuke is: "You want to bury me!" implying, "You want me to hurry up and die so that my authority over you will be at an end and you will be on your own."

A Lebanese compliment given by an older person to young man is, "You will bury me, my son". This means "I think so much of you that I look on you as my own son who will care for me in my old age and lay me with respect in my grave."

So in Middle East culture – then and now – a son has the **duty** to remain at home until the death of his parents. Then – and only then – can he consider other options. This is the community's expectation. This is roughly equivalent to peer group pressure.

So the recruit is saying to the Lord Jesus, "My community makes demands on me and the pull of these demands is very strong. Surely you don't expect me to violate the expectations of my community?"

This is precisely what the Lord Jesus does require! Proclaiming the Kingdom of God means announcing that it has a **present reality**. So the Lord Jesus is saying, "**You** (emphatic in Greek) go and proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom. Let the spiritually dead take care of the traditional responsibilities of the local community." Did he follow? We don't know.

Lessons

1. Loyalty to the Lord Jesus and His Kingdom is more important than any loyalty to the cultural norms of your society.
2. The Lord Jesus accepts no authority higher than His own.
3. The cultural demands and expectations of the community are not acceptable excuses for failure in discipleship.
4. The ***"Follow Me"*** of the Lord Jesus is defined as a command to "Proclaim the Kingdom of God". The Lord Jesus is absolutely unique in every culture as the final authority to whom obedience must be given. As heirs of the glory and children of the King of Kings, we should declare plainly and also demonstrate by our conduct the **reality** of the "world to come". It should be plain to all that that it is what really fills our thoughts. Our Master's work waits for us and this work has first place in our hearts.
5. There must be a centrifugal force in evangelism. This person is a potential recruit, not a volunteer. The Lord Jesus goes to him and calls him to be a disciple. We need to do the same.

The Third Dialogue: The Furrow

This volunteer, like the first would-be disciple, offers to follow the Lord Jesus. But like the second recruit, he has a precondition: ***"Let me first say farewell to those at my home"***. This seems to be a perfectly fair request. When Elisha was called to serve Elijah he asked for time to go home and ***"kiss my father and my mother"***. His request was granted. It involved butchering and cooking two oxen and serving a meal to the extended family. (1 Kings 19:19-21) But in this case, the Lord Jesus refused his request. Why?

The Greek word used is '*apotasso'*. It is usually translated 'to say goodbye to' or 'to take leave of'. It occurs four times in the rest of the New Testament.

- Mk. 6:46 ***"After he had <u>taken leave</u> of them, He went into the hills."***
- Acts 18:18 ***"After this …… Paul <u>took leave</u> of the brethren."***

- Acts 18:21 ***"But on <u>taking leave</u> of them …."***
- 2 Cor. 2:13 ***"I did not find my brother Titus there, so I <u>took leave</u> of them."***

In Middle Eastern culture the person who leaves doesn't say "Goodbye". The person who is leaving must request permission to leave from those who are staying. The people who remain say, "Goodbye" to those who are leaving. So in the Arab World and in other cultures, the one who leaves requests permission to go: "With your permission". Those who remain respond with, "God go with you" – i.e. granting you permission to go. In the four cases quoted above, the Lord Jesus and Paul are those who are leaving. So they politely "take leave" of those who stay behind.

This volunteer is asking for the right to go home and **get permission** from those at home – i.e. his parents – to join the Lord Jesus. Now everyone listening knows that the response will be, "No"! The father will refuse to allow his son to wander off on a highly questionable enterprise. His parents will ask many questions. What do you want to do? Where does Jesus come from? Where is he going? What is he going to do in Jerusalem? How much does he pay? What's in it for us? How will you provide for us? They will soon find out that they won't benefit at all from their son becoming a follower of the Lord Jesus. They will forbid him to join the Lord Jesus. This is a ready-made excuse for the volunteer. He can pretend to be sad, but blame his father for not letting him join the Lord Jesus.

An old Syriac translation (very similar to Aramaic) says, ***"Let me first explain my case to those in my house."*** Basically he was requesting permission to submit the question of following the Lord Jesus to his family's authority. The root of the Greek word '*apotasso*' has the verb *'tasso'* meaning "fix, "order" or "arrange for". So for about 1200 years Arabic versions have translated the Greek text, ***"First let me <u>make arrangements</u> for those at home".***

Culturally this man is saying, "I will follow you, Lord, but of course the authority of my father is **higher** than your authority and I must have his permission before I start to follow You." In the Middle East the authority of the father is supreme. It is little wonder that 'the father' became a symbol of God.

Today a senior, highly educated, civil engineer working in the capital will travel back to his village to ask permission of his poorly educated father to attend an international conference in a foreign country. His trip home will be ceremonial. Yet he will make the trip as a sign of respect. In the past in traditional village life a son would submit all the details of his life to his parents.

Middle Easterners are deeply shocked at what the Lord Jesus said to this third man. They are stunned! The Lord Jesus, who was in his early 30s, is claiming an authority **higher** than that of the family of this volunteer.

Jesus told the volunteer a short parable drawn from **agriculture.** In the 1st century a Palestinian plough was guided with one hand – usually the left. It was relatively light. This hand keeps the plough upright and straight. The plough can be lifted over a stone or a rock and added pressure down is used on the good soil. The other hand is used to drive the unruly oxen with a goad about 2 metres long. He looks between the oxen to see if he is keeping a straight furrow. It takes a great deal of dexterity and concentration. If the ploughman loses concentration, all sorts of disasters can happen. There are a number of steps:

1. Breaking up the stubble after harvest and making broad furrows to absorb the autumn and winter rain.
2. Re-ploughing again just before sowing in a way so that the furrows are closer set.
3. The final work of covering the seed.

So the image is clear. The tension is between loyalty to the Lord Jesus as the inaugurator of the Kingdom of God with its **all-consuming demands** and loyalty to the authority of the family. Now for every believer **both** loyalties are priority, but when they are in conflict it can be excruciatingly painful.

The symbol of ploughing is well chosen for a distracted ploughman might catch the plough and perhaps break its wooden point or he might unnecessarily tire at the oxen pulling in vain against a plough caught on a rock. The plough might cut across previously ploughed furrows, spoiling what's already been done or cut aimlessly into the unploughed land making the next few furrows more difficult. The ploughman might ruin the drainage system or leave the planted seeds exposed to the birds.

On top of this tension is another one – the Middle East concept of disciple/teacher. This is **not** like studying in a university for the purpose of learning. It is cementing a lifelong relationship to a person. So the Lord Jesus is demanding that His authority take precedence over **all** other relationships for the rest of our lives. If you can't resolve this tension of conflicting loyalties and you keep looking back to see what "the family" is saying, you are "useless" for the Kingdom of God. A ploughman distracted by divided loyalties will generally make a mess of things. He will be unproductive or even destructive in his labours.

What was the result? Pressed to a clear-cut choice with painful alternatives, this third man must decide. He volunteered with apparent confidence that his loyalty to the Lord Jesus would be accepted as secondary to his loyalty to his family. The parable of the plough wipes out his assumption. What will he do? We are not told. But we have to respond!

In summary

The Lord Jesus challenged this volunteer: "My authority is absolute. Even the authority of your own family is a distraction to be avoided if it conflicts with My authority, if you would be of any use to Me and My Kingdom". So we see that:

1. The call of the Kingdom of God must take precedence over all other loyalties.
2. The disciple with divided loyalties is a disruptive force in the work of the Kingdom and is unfit to participate in it.
3. To follow the Lord Jesus is not defined as an emotional response or intellectual insight. It is compared to the taking up of a strenuous, creative, all-consuming task like putting your hand to a plough and joining a team of oxen.
4. Service in the Kingdom of God is synonymous with following the Lord Jesus. To serve the Lord Jesus is to serve God.
5. So do you have an undivided heart? Does the Lord Jesus have all your attention and loyalty? Unless He has all, He cannot use you. To be a disciple there is a threefold demand:
    - Detachment from all that hinders our spiritual progress – no anchor that holds me back when the Lord Jesus wants me to go forward.
    - When the highest earthly love and duty comes into conflict with my loyalty to Him, I must obey the Lord Jesus.
    - The highest priority in my life must be the wishes of the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus isn't asking any more of us than He Himself experienced. Luke 9:51 tells us, ***"He set His face to go to Jerusalem"***. There He took up the Cross and went to an agonising death because it was the will of the Father. He never looked back. He set His face to come into known hostility, to doom, to death and to triumph – the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Let us be willing to do anything and suffer anything and give up everything for the sake of the Lord Jesus. It may cost us in this life, but the reward will be great in eternity.

God will regularly test the earnestness of your heart by bringing you to a fork in the road. When it becomes necessary to choose between two ways, which will you follow? Will you follow comfort, convention and custom or will you follow Christ? The text from the very beginning has been, ***"Follow Me"***.