

In this long passage are a series of interactions between "seekers" of Jesus and Jesus Himself. What is surprising about these interactions is that Jesus is so different from what we would expect. That's just like Jesus. Here we see people coming to Jesus who declare their desire to follow Him, but He responds back to them harshly, not warmly. This is strange to our ears. Usually, Jesus responds very warmly to the people whom we would expect a harsher reply. He is gentle to the prostitutes, inclusive of the lepers, inviting to the tax collectors, even patient with the Pharisees. But when these men, these disciples and seekers, try to walk with Him He calls them "faithless and perverse generation", rebukes them, warns them, and responds to their proclaimed allegiance with dire warnings of doom and gloom if they follow Him.

Yet, this is what amazes me and endears me to Jesus. He's not like any other leader. When a person comes up to a leader and proclaims, "I am with you", the leader usually responds with great affection and winsomeness. In fact, most leaders promise great things to their followers at the front end, only to let them down in the end. Think of our politicians: great promises to win favor in order to get some bill passed, but once the bill is passed the truth comes out. "I won't raise taxes" only to find taxes raised after the election. "If you like your health care plan, you can keep your health care plan. Period." But Jesus is not like this at all. He is not trying to persuade you with some promises of *immediate* benefit or to fulfill your every dream on this earth. He remakes your dreams into deeper, more glorious, dreams that are worth losing your life, worth waiting for and suffering for and dying for. So, Jesus does promise great things, glorious things, but they are not "already", but they are "still to come". There will be a day where every sorrow is swallowed, where every joy is made full, where every hope is met with the sight of the beauty of God. There are crowns and castles and belonging to come, but not before crosses and pain and rejection and sorrow. And Jesus tells you this up front, before you follow Him, before you "cross the border", He informs you that your choice will be extremely costly. There is no promise of comfortable, wealthy, healthy, or nice life here and now. The purveyors of the prosperity gospel are false teachers, wolves, liars, and opposed to the Kingdom of God for promising such demonstrative ear-tickling lies. Jesus never does. If there is anybody who should never be surprised by suffering, it's Christians.

So, when people come to him with over-eager hope of gaining the world, saying "I will follow you *anywhere*" Jesus doesn't respond with deceptive encouragement, but severity of truth: "Birds of the air have their nests. Foxes have their dens, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." In other words, following Me will be hard, difficult, and you will not receive the benefits of this world in the here and now for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking and houses and wealth, but righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit when we obtain the eternal city. For, if I go and prepare you a place I will come again and bring you back to where I am that we may be together. But, for now, while I'm gone. It's going to be very difficult. Are you up for that? Then don't look back, but forward. Don't rely upon anything but Me! Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

1. We Wear Crosses Before We Wear Crowns – the Loss Precedes the Gain

- a. Demon-possessed boy -
 - i. disciples can't cast it out because of *unbelief*
 1. they stopped depending upon Jesus and were starting to consider themselves great
 2. They were not humbly believing in Jesus, but rather proudly believing in Jesus - considering themselves great workers within the kingdom
 3. Mark notes that they were not praying, thus they were acting like God without depending upon God, thus they failed in faith and in effectiveness
 - ii. Thus, Jesus pointedly calls them out with some very strong words (Deut 32:5) and reminds them again of his impending suffering, being delivered over into the hands of men.
 1. They didn't understand this, *because it was being hidden from them*.
 - a. It was hidden by God for the purpose of Christ Jesus' death
 - b. God sovereignly hides the truth from the disciples so that they don't try and make Jesus the King of Israel...He must suffer and die
 - c. They would eventually look back on words like these and understand and see God's sovereign plan in action (Acts 2:23)
- b. Debate of greatness between the disciples
 - i. Jesus teaches them that they must humble themselves to receive the weakest, the ones that don't gain them power or greatness, but only cost and service
 - ii. "Receiving" a child "on the basis of my name"
 - iii. The least is the one who is great
 1. Jesus came to serve, suffer, die - not be considered great by the world
 2. The disciples are still avoiding their crosses, seeking instead to "gain the world" and be "great" in the eyes of the world
 - a. Thus, they tried to stop someone who didn't travel with them from casting out demons - seeking their own brand rather than Christ Jesus' brand

- b. I'm sure that they are thinking of Jesus' glory and the coming of the last days, the eschatological kingdom of God whereby they would rule as vice-regents in his kingdom

2. NEW DIRECTION: "Jesus Set His Face Toward Jerusalem" to Die for Mercy

- a. Where he was to fulfill his exodus by being delivered into the hands of men (betrayed), rejected by his brothers (leaders of Israel), suffer cruelly and unjustly at the hands of the world, die the death of a criminal in a shameful public execution, and be raised to life.
 - i. This is why he "set his face" or "established himself toward" Jerusalem
- b. In Samaria he is rejected because he is so dedicated toward moving to Jerusalem
 - i. The Samaritans here are being selfish, and rejecting Jesus because He *seems* to prefer Jerusalem to Samaria
 - ii. What they don't see is that He is moving toward Jerusalem with such perseverance because of his necessary suffering, death, and resurrection. I'm sure he would have rather stayed in Samaria if he was only thinking of himself.
 - 1. He is giving up his power, his greatness, his opportunity to be loved in the moment in order to fulfill the Father's exquisite plan of redemption through His blood and resurrection.
- c. When James and John (sons of Thunder!), see Samaria reject the great King (remember they were at the Transfiguration), they decide that this rejection will bring the doom of the Samaritans and request to help
 - i. This is not such an odd request in the light of their eschatological expectations
 - ii. 2 Kings 1:1-15 – Ahaziah rejected God and sought help from false gods from Samaria and Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume two groups of fifty soldiers sent to him.
- d. James and John receive a rebuke from Jesus for desiring judgment rather than mercy
 - i. They still don't get it and think themselves greater than the Samaritans, yet they are still seeking their own greatness, just like the Samaritans, and are not seeing what it means to follow Him.
 - ii. He walks in a new mercy, setting His face to suffer and die for the salvation of those who could never enter the kingdom apart from His mercy

3. Entering the Kingdom Means Jesus Must Be First Over EVERYTHING

- a. Three men with two major lessons: Nothing can come before Jesus if you want to follow Him
- b. Note that Jesus relates to people in a very individual manner, meetings tailor-made to specific idols of the heart.
 - i. The rich young ruler was told that to inherit eternal life he must give everything away and follow Jesus. This is not an absolute, for many of Jesus' closest disciples had homes and resources. It was tailor-made to show that nothing can first in the heart of a disciple who follows Jesus. Jesus was pointing out that which was first in the heart of the wealthy man, and he is doing the same here.
 - 1. There is a cost to following Jesus, a "losing the world" and a "carrying a cross".
 - ii. Jesus is applying this directly to these three individuals in an immediate and pointed way to make them choose between their greatest loves: Is Jesus worth missing my father's funeral? Is Jesus worth missing my grandchild's birth? Is Jesus worth never being married? Is Jesus worth giving my retirement account away? Is Jesus worth more than...everything and everyone?
 - 1. What we must not do in this situation is misapply this immediate command and make it a universal command, so that we would never attend to any funeral or burying of family members. This is not Jesus' point, just as everyone giving everything away, or nobody having a home, or never saying goodbye to family. These are specific commands, which is why they seem so harsh, to people who had something "first" that Jesus was pointing out.
- c. First Man: The Idealist - "I will follow you *wherever* you go."
 - i. This man is very excited, very passionate, very demonstrative in his willingness to follow Jesus "wherever"
 - 1. There are those within the visible church attendants who are very demonstrative to follow Jesus because they believe that He will deliver comfort, milk and honey, that he will basically bring all the fullness of the kingdom of God *now*
 - a. But the Kingdom of God has come, but not fully, it is "already, but not yet"
 - b. Many are excited about excitement, not necessarily excited about Jesus, loving the "not yet", but not the Christ
 - 2. The Idealist thinks that Jesus is delivering the kingdom fully, with all the crowns and treasures and glories of heaven immediately
 - a. The Idealist doesn't realize that following the King means that for a time you will suffer, carry a cross, and die

- b. To live in the “already” of the kingdom doesn’t mean comfort or wealth or anything that leaders usually promise to their people before they get elected
 - ii. Jesus sees in this man an unwillingness to leave the comforts of life, so he informs the man that following Him means that you won’t have a place to stay, a place to lay your head, a home to call your own.
 - 1. Words are cheap - count the cost (as I head to Jerusalem to die)
 - 2. This man was quick to sign up, but seemed unclear about the severity of the journey
 - a. It’s like signing up for the military during the Vietnam War thinking that you’re going camping
 - b. What happens when you don’t receive the glories now, but instead are called to suffer? Demas happens – “in love with this present world, has deserted me”
 - iii. There is no indication what the man’s reply was, but that’s not the point here.
 - 1. The point is that following Jesus has a cost, and we should not ignore nor neglect its reality
 - 2. To follow the King means that you must take a decisive step into another world – into the world of the Kingdom that is already, but not yet – to a world that will bring suffering, rejection, hatred, even death
 - 3. But also into a world that will come fully when the King returns from His journey and will be crowns and dancing and joy and rest.
- d. Second Man: the Pragmatist - "First, let me go to bury my father."
 - i. There is an invitation by Jesus to this man, unlike the first man who seemed to volunteer quickly.
 - 1. This man wasn’t so excited to follow Jesus because he wasn’t an idealist, expecting great things
 - 2. In fact, he most likely doesn’t see the greatness of the kingdom at all
 - a. Like the former man didn’t see the reality of the kingdom, this man fails to see the greatness of the kingdom that swallows all other kingdoms
 - b. Thus, he is clinging to the kingdom that his father will pass down to him, the kingdom of his inheritance and his family honor
 - ii. The man responds to Jesus’ call with a qualification
 - 1. He wanted to bury his father first.
 - 2. "First" is the key word - I will follow you Jesus, but something must come first.
 - a. I will sign up to follow you, but there is *something more important* that I must deal with first.
 - 3. It may be that his father had died that day (Jewish custom was to bury the dead the day that they died) and he wanted to have the funeral
 - a. He may have been on the road in order to get to the funeral
 - b. Just let me go to the funeral and then I’ll catch up later
 - 4. It could be that his father hadn’t died at all, but that this man would rather that his father not disown him or remove his inheritance
 - a. In this case, there may have been in this caveat a fear that his father would be very angry with him if he followed Jesus
 - b. There is also the fear that he would lose his inheritance if he followed Jesus
 - c. This love for, or fear of, immediate family often keeps people from truly following Jesus
 - i. I can’t upset my wife or my children
 - ii. I need to be with my husband on Sundays, so I attend the Mormon church with him
 - iii. I will follow you, eventually, Jesus, but first let me achieve this, or attain that, or have this relationship first
 - 1. Some of you here today are in this boat, in relationships that are dishonoring to Christ Jesus, outside the bounds of sexual purity
 - 2. “I will obey, eventually, but first...”
 - d. Thus, wait until he dies, Jesus, and I get *what I really need*, then I’ll follow you
 - i. Do you see this? “What I really need” is the “first” qualification.
 - ii. Anything that we “must have first” before we follow Jesus is our functional Savior, that which rules us.
 - 1. Some people will say that one must accept Jesus only as Savior, but not as Lord
 - 2. But that is not possible, for He is and must be both at the same time

3. Because whatever you must have (your Lord, what rules your heart), is also what you are actually depending upon to save you – it is your Savior, not Jesus
 4. “But first I must...” = your salvation, and it rules you
 - e. Jesus makes it very clear, strongly clear, hauntingly and aggressively clear, that following Him means NOTHING and NOONE comes before Him
- iii. Jesus responds with seeming harshness - "Let the dead bury their own. You go and proclaim the kingdom of God."
1. PRINCIPLE: Nothing can come before Jesus, no "but first", even good things cannot precede following Him
 2. Even the most intimate family responsibilities must be given second place when it comes to following Him
 - a. This is not unusual in severe situations of our lives
 - i. Military, Emergency Workers, I would say politicians...but...
 - ii. When a person signs up to be spy, they must sign paperwork that states their understanding that if they die in the field, their family will never know what happened.
 - iii. When the severity of necessity arrives, the most intimate family arrangements are often pushed back in priority
 3. Jesus Himself lived this out
 - a. Luke 8:19-21
 - b. “My real family are those who hear the word of God and do it.”
 - i. OUCH!
 4. What is of greater necessity or importance than the glory of God?
 - a. What hope do I have but Him? What delight can compare to the delight of God? What joy or what love can compare to His?
 - b. If I think that my wife’s love surpasses the glory of God, then I am a fool and a blind man! And I love my wife and she delights me, but not in comparison to Him.
 - c. There are many people who don’t love Me who can handle those things (funeral)...you follow me.
 5. Jesus is also teaching that whatever comes first, before Him, will kill you
 - a. “let the dead...”
 - b. Those who refuse to follow him are dead, not merely doing poorly, but dead, and they can attend to all the things that dead people rely upon for salvation
 - c. Like Frankenstein’s monster:
 - i. This man wanted Jesus to give him a jolt of blessing *so that he could have the things his heart wanted before Jesus!*
 - ii. He is taking all the dead parts of various idols (inheritance, honor, people’s pleasure with him) and wanting Jesus to jolt them to life
 1. Using Jesus’ power to get his idols
 2. But this is a monstrosity! It’s no wonder you walk around fearing fire when you seek Jesus to get your “first” idols...they are killing you.
- e. Third Man: the Indecisive - "I will follow you, but let me FIRST say farewell to those at my home."
- i. “...but first let me go back”
 1. Reluctance and indecisive - half-heartedness
 2. Irony of “following” that starts with “but first I must go back”
 - ii. Jesus: "Nobody who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit (useful) in the kingdom of God."
 1. Any idols of our hearts which are "I will follow you, but first let me..." make us useless in the kingdom.
 - a. Nobody every plowed a straight line while looking backwards
 - i. Just like nobody who puts his foot to the gas pedal while looking back is fit to drive
 - b. Me and football/video games when my children need help with homework (Eric and I playing one day) – I was useless as a parent
 2. Jesus is not requiring perfect obedience, there is mercy for our failures, but He is requiring full *commitment* to Him and to his kingdom
 - a. You can make great efforts to get all the way to the Canadian border, but until you step across, you haven’t entered Canada

- b. You can make great efforts, great strivings, great progress toward the Kingdom of God, but if you haven't stepped across into the Kingdom of God with full commitment, you haven't entered at all
 - iii. Discipleship leaves no room for excuse, compromise, or half-heartedness
 - 1. The cost of discipleship is that you will lose things in this earth, both physical and emotional.
 - 2. And the hard truth is that if you refuse to trust Jesus when your heart longs for what He has called you to leave, then you are useless in the kingdom of God.
 - iv. Step across the line and enter the Kingdom of God today giving full and ultimate allegiance to the King who humbled himself, suffered your fate, bore the wrath, despised its shame, poured out his life, was buried in death, and has been raised to the newness of life
 - 1. Your career won't do that for you
 - 2. Your family can't do that for you
 - 3. Your money will fail you and your kingdom will end, but the Lord Jesus Christ never fails and His kingdom never ends
 - a. "The stories are true" – the kingdom of God is real: already, and yet to come
 - b. There is a land of milk of honey, of purity and righteousness and holiness and joy and peace
 - c. There is honor awaiting after the suffering, just like Jesus was exalted through His suffering, so it is for the citizens of the kingdom

4. What Do You Really Want?

- a. There are competing desires, possibly both good desires
- b. But which desire will win is based upon which object of our desire is perceived to be the most beautiful
 - i. When my wife is the most beautiful desire of my heart (she is a good thing), then I will move heaven and earth to have her, rejecting all other women
 - ii. If respect as a preacher is the most beautiful desire of my heart (good thing to be a good preacher), then I will move heaven and earth to be a faithful preacher
 - iii. If my children are the most beautiful desire of my heart (good things), then I will move heaven and earth to protect them, to build them up, and to send them out mature in wisdom
 - iv. Yet, I can gain this entire world of relationships, respect, honor, wealth, happiness, friends, etc. and lose my very self, and be utterly useless in the kingdom of God
 - 1. Pilgrim's Progress: "Life! Life! Eternal Life!"
- c. Paradoxically to our common thinking, when I do value Christ Jesus rightly, seeing Him as the most beautiful object of my heart's desire, then I actually love my wife best, my children best, and preach better.
 - i. John Piper's solar system analogy
- d. So, what is so beautiful about God that makes Jesus Christ first before everything else?
 - i. He created all that exists by His own volition (Ps 33:9/Rev 4:8-11)
 - ii. He upholds all that exists by His own sovereign Word (Isa 41:13/Heb 1:3)
 - iii. He reveals Himself to us that we might know Him (Isa 41:6/1 John 5:20)
 - iv. He is holy and wholly right in all that that he is, thinks, and does (Isa 6:3/Rev 4:8)
 - v. He is compassionate and patient with sinners (Ex 34:6-7)
 - vi. He does not leave the guilty unpunished (Ex 34:6-7)
 - vii. He rejoices over His people with dancing and singing (Zeph 3:17)
 - viii. He loves with the unique redemptive love of GRACE – THE GOD WHO DIES FOR HIS PEOPLE AND IS RAISED UP TO RULE THEM FOREVER AS THE KINDRED KING

Stepping into the kingdom only takes one step, but it must be taken with a face set like flint and with eyes fixed on the future glory and the promise of the presence of Jesus. For, the kingdom does not consist of partying here and now, but of righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit. This is acceptable to God. We do rejoice in the Holy Spirit in the here and now, the down payment of His presence, yet His presence is to help us suffer well, to rejoice in the promise, to love in the midst of rejection, and to hope for the return of the King. It is the joy of the hopeful and our hope is not set upon the things of this world, as beautiful and as good as they, but are set into the far country, where our inheritance is being kept by the power of God, guarded, to be revealed upon His return that all things might work to the praise of His glory and honor on that day. We would see Jesus and know Him more, glorious over all. We enter the kingdom no other way, for there is no other king.

We follow a King who died to bring us all the way home. The stories are true. We have before us, in a place prepared by Jesus Christ, a kingdom that never ends, with no suffering or sorrow or pain or sickness or death. No separation and no sin. That is a glorious future of grace. And we receive this kingdom because the Son of God, with all the richness of His glory, laid aside His crown and picked up a cross to bear the price of all evil and horror and injustice, was crucified according to the sovereign plan of the Father who loves His chosen ones, you, so that you and I might worship Him in the

fullness of joy forever and ever. And we follow Him in this walk, our crosses may come before our crowns. Yet, the stories are true. Let us remember the King's sacrifice together in Communion that the depth and the costly love that showed us might fix our eyes keenly upon Him to set our faces like flint upon His glorious face and be utterly transformed in the seeing to never look back. Ushers please serve this powerful memorial of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Benediction

(1 Peter 1:3-9) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith-- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.