

# THE FOX, THE FUNERAL AND THE FURROW

LUKE 9:57-62 - Labor Day, 2005

This past week, I read a list of evaluatory statements that had been made by supervisors concerning those who report to them at a large company in our nation. These reportedly were the actual statements word for word that were compiled from employee evaluations at this company.

\*This associate is not so much of a has-been, but more of a won't be.

\*This young lady has delusions of adequacy.

\*He sets low personal standards for himself and then consistently fails to achieve them.

\*When she opens her mouth, it seems it is only to change feet.

\*This employee should go far, and the sooner he starts, the better.

\*If you give him a penny for his thoughts, you will get back change.

\*In my last evaluation, I wrote that this employee had reached rock bottom. Now in this report I realize that he has started to dig.

While it's good to be able to laugh in life situations and we need to do that to cope with certain circumstances of life, these evaluation quotes illustrate a dangerous attitude that many in our country have developed

towards work. For there are many today who are more interested in the work that they can avoid rather than the work that they actually do for a living. The heroes in our culture today are those who get paid exorbitant amounts of money for doing what appears to be relatively little work. The professional athletes who get sign multi-million dollar contracts to play a game, the music stars who ride in their limousines to concert halls where they play music on stage to adoring crowds, the person who becomes a millionaire overnight just because he bought the winning lottery ticket – these are the people that most people seem to envy in our nation. Today, it seems that there are so many who are only interested in benefits, in perks, in vacations, in time off, in ease of working conditions. The actual work that is performed is secondary to them. So a great deal of time is spent in negotiating and arbitrating, so that an agreeable compromise can be reached between employer and employee.

On this weekend when we have traditionally honored work, I would like for us to look at a passage of Scripture that addresses the subject of Spiritual Labor. For in a very real sense, we could say that each believer is an employee of Jesus Christ. Every Christian has been called to be a

worker in God's vineyard. I would like for us to observe a scene from the gospel of Luke where 3 potential workers tried to negotiate with Jesus Christ about their working conditions. But as we will see, while Jesus Christ was interested in the validity of their dedication and labors for his kingdom, he was not interested in negotiating with them concerning their labor.

### TURN TO LUKE 9

Jesus was walking along the road when He had 3 conversations with 3 different individuals concerning their willingness to follow him and serve in his spiritual kingdom.

1. Notice Luke's account of the first conversation. READ Luke 9:57,58.

LK 9:57 As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

LK 9:58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

This first man who approached Jesus was obviously interested in service in God's kingdom because of the position and prestige that he

thought would be gained by it. At least that is the perception that Jesus seemed to have.

We can assume this because this man approached Jesus. "I will follow you wherever you go." he offered. The second man did not freely offer his services, but rather Jesus approached him with the command to follow him. But this first man came to Jesus offering his services to him. No one recruited him, but he was drawn to Jesus and the disciples for some reason. But Jesus immediately perceived that the drawing card was position and prestige.

You see, at this time in Christ's career, the word had spread that this man was the Messiah, sent from God. The rumors had it that Jesus Christ was going to set up the kingdom of God, and that this divine kingdom was going to overthrow the Roman government. Many looked at the miracles that Jesus was doing and concluded that He indeed was the Son of God, and that he had the power necessary to dispense of the mighty Romans. So there were many who were anxious to get on the bandwagon. When there is a movement that appears to be very successful, there are always many who are ready and willing to jump on the bandwagon. So it was

with Jesus. This was a very successful time in his ministry from all outward appearances. He was popular, he was powerful, he was persuasive. Now would seem to be the time to join the movement, so that one could get good seniority for that time when the kingdom was finally established.

So would seem to be the motive by this self-proclaimed recruit as we judge how Jesus responded to him. For rather than encouraging his participation, Jesus simply reminded him that he was choosing to follow a homeless person. This was not a king with a palace, this was not even a fox with a borough or a bird with a nest. But rather, this was a man without a home, a man who spent his life living in the borrowed rooms of others. If the king himself were of such lowly estate, the workers in the kingdom could not hope for great prestige and position. So if an influential position was the volunteer's desire, he had better think again before joining the force.

We are not told the decision that was made- but at least this eager volunteer had something to think about. The cost, the sacrifice, the humility that would be required in becoming a worker for Jesus.

There are many who would follow Jesus for perceived prestige or position. Perhaps they feel that identifying themselves with Jesus Christ would make others think more highly of them. Perhaps they feel that following God would bring special blessing in their lives which would lead to greater financial advancement. Perhaps they feel that there is plenty of room for advancement with positions in Christian institutions. Certainly, there is the promise of an eternal, heavenly home after death. But every Christian needs to take a long and serious look at the master, Jesus Christ. He lived a life of humility and service. And he said "no servant is above his master". Following Jesus Christ will not likely bring great fame and applause in the eyes of this world, for the world rejected the son of God himself- they will certainly ridicule and mock his followers.

2. The second conversation was initiated by Jesus as he invites another individual to follow after him. Notice it with me. READ Luke 9:59-60.

LK 9:59 He said to another man, "Follow me."

But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

LK 9:60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Now, at first, we think this to be quite an unreasonable request by Jesus. After all, any employer that would deny his employee taking time off to attend the funeral of his father would seem to be quite hard-hearted, wouldn't he?

But upon further examination of this passage, we see that a cultural understanding helps us to see what the real issue was all about here. This man's father had not recently passed away at all. If that would have been the case, this man would not have been out walking along the road with Jesus. He would have rather been back at home making the funeral arrangements and grieving with the rest of the family as was the custom.

No, the phrase, "bury my father" was a Jewish colloquial expression which refers to the mid-eastern duty of a son remaining near the home of his parents while they are still living until they pass away and are laid to rest respectfully.

Listen to the Christian Arab Ibnal Salibi who sees the implications of

this request from the cultural background of the middle east. "Let me go and bury means: let me go and serve my father while he is alive and after he dies I will bury him and come. . . If the father had really died, why then was he not at that very moment keeping vigil over the body of the father? In reality he intended to defer the matter of following Jesus to a distant future when his father died as an old man, who knows when. Little did he know that Jesus in a very short time would himself give up his spirit."

Just as there are some who would seek to follow Jesus Christ for selfish motives, so there are many others who see the truths of the claims of Christianity, but just want to delay their commitment to Christ for a while. Just as the Roman governor, Felix, upon hearing the gospel message from the Apostle Paul said, "Not now, not yet, I will send for you again at a more convenient time", so there are many who have the intention of following Jesus Christ eventually- but not now, not yet. But just like Felix of whom we have no record of conversion, that more convenient time never seems to come. Yes, personal inconvenience is a hindrance for many to following Jesus Christ, and procrastination is also a great hindrance as well.

3. But notice now the third conversation with me. Again, this individual approaches Christ as a volunteer, but he was dissuaded as well because of wrong priorities in his life.

READ Luke 9:61,62

LK 9:61 Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

LK 9:62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Now again, at first glance, this seems to be a very reasonable request. After all, didn't Elisha go back to say "good-bye" to his family, and even sacrifice the oxen that he was using to plow the fields before following Elijah? How could Jesus refuse a person saying "good-bye" to this family?

But again, a more careful consideration of the culture of Christ's day helps us to see the real issue here.

It was the common practice in Biblical Jewish homes for children to ask the permission and blessing of parents to leave home before they would ever consider doing it. In fact, the Old Syriac translation of this passage catches the significance of this potential follower's condition

when it translates his request "let me first explain my case to those in my house." These early Syriac fathers who lived in the middle east knew perfectly well that this volunteer was not going home to simply kiss his mother on the cheek and shake hands with his father. Rather he was requesting permission of Jesus Christ to submit the question of following Jesus to the authority of his parents. Let me go back home and request permission to leave and follow you. If they say "yes", I will be back. But if they refuse to give me permission, well you understand. I must submit to their decision.

Kenneth Bailey who was a missionary serving in the middle east and teaching in a Seminary there tells of the reaction of his students when he read this passage of Scripture to them in his book Through Peasant Eyes. "The present author will never forget a class of Middle Eastern Seminary students who literally turned white when this text was read with its clear affirmation that Jesus is claiming an authority higher than the authority of the volunteer's father. It is difficult to communicate the stunning shock that comes to a Middle Eastern reader when the reality of the demands of this text are made clear. This shock must have been all the more

disturbing when claims were made by a young man (Jesus) in his early thirties in the first century."

Jesus answered this man's request to go back and first ask permission of his parents with the statement "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven." Jesus of course is referring to the wooden plow that was pulled by an ox or donkey that was commonly used in his day. The farmer would guide the plow with one hand, generally his left if he were right handed. This left hand had to at the same time keep the plow upright and regulate its depth. The farmer would tilt it to lift it over big rocks or stones in its path. Then with the other hand, generally the right, the farmer would have the reins to direct the ox or the donkey as he pulled the plow through the ground. All the while, the farmer had to keep his eyes ahead to ensure a straight furrow. If the plowman turned around to look back, the furrow that was carved would not be parallel to the others, either jutting way out into the field or cutting back over ground that had already been tilled. So Jesus was saying that when one accepted the responsibility and challenge of following him, when he put his hand to the spiritual plow, he must not look back. He

must not allow his attentions to be distracted. For if the highest energies were not devoted to his spiritual life, he would not be able to perform the quality of work that God demands of him.

Now I trust that you are beginning to see the importance of the message that Jesus was giving to these 3 individuals here. Just as Jesus Christ attracted many during his earthly ministry, so in each generation thousands of people have been compelled by the gospel message. And this is both natural and good for the gospel is the good news of salvation. Jesus Christ promised an abundant life to his followers with an eternity of blessing to follow. And the Savior has never disappointed one true follower. Every single disciple of Christ has found Him to be true to his promises.

But in Christ's day, as in every generation following, there have been many who have come to Christ with impure motives. Many have tried to use Christianity to their own selfish advantage. And God will not allow that to happen. Just as many in Christ's time who heard the rumors of the Kingdom of God that the Messiah was going to establish came to Jesus desiring to be a part of this conquering program, so that they might rule

and reign with him reeking revenge on those cruel Romans, so many others who have followed have tried to use the teachings and programs of Christ to their own advantage, to gain position, to gain prestige, to make themselves famous. But Jesus would remind us again today that the Son of God did not even have a home of his own while he lived on this earth. We have been forcefully reminded just this past week of the unspeakable tragedy of losing one's home as the results of the devastating Hurricane Katrina have become more and more evident in the Gulf Coast region of our country. How our hearts go out to those who have lost their homes and possessions. But this also reminds us of the fact that Jesus lived his entire ministry without a home of his own. He left his home in Nazareth voluntarily to accomplish the work that God had called him to do. And while God in his bountiful goodness allows the majority of his children to blessing of the security of living in a home of their own, we need to be reminded that the servant is not above his master. A person who tries to follow Jesus Christ just to find personal conveniences has an impure motive, and God will not honor it.

Just as many in Christ's day wanted to put off that commitment to

become a disciple to a more opportune time for them, so many thousands who have followed have tried to make God fit their time-table as well. When I am ready for God, then I will follow him. Some want to enjoy the pleasures of their sin for a longer season, thinking that they can just come to God on their own terms. But Jesus would not allow this individual to dictate the time table of discipleship. The Apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth that "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." 2 Cor. 6:2. Countless people in history have been like the rich man in Christ's parable who built bigger and bigger barns to house all of his wealth thinking himself to be in control of his life only to have God say to him, "thou fool, today your soul is required of you." We have no guarantee of the future, we have no assurance that a more convenient time will come. Jesus Christ desires that we drop our nets at the shore and follow him immediately and fully as those first disciples did. We must not procrastinate in our commitment to Christ.

Just as many in Christ's day wanted to partake in all of the blessings of God's kingdom, but wanted to subject the Savior to a higher authority, so today many are trying to live with an inverted priority structure. Now it

is true that God has ordained authority structures here on this earth, and that parents and governmental officials and bosses and others are a very important part of this. And often, God does speak His will to us through His authority structure. Especially during the younger years, children are commanded to obey their parents in the Lord. But we must realize that God will allow no authority to ultimately be over His. Our commitment to Jesus Christ must be greater than all others. We must have our allegiance to our Savior first on our priority list.

As we conclude this morning on this great Labor Day weekend, I must ask myself as well as each of you how we are doing as a follower of Jesus Christ, as a worker in the kingdom of God. Am I committed to following the Messiah whatever the cost or am I more interested in personal convenience? Am I ready to work in his kingdom, or am I procrastinating, negotiating for a more convenient time? Does He have the highest priority in my life or is something or someone else a greater authority in my life?