

FICKLE FOLLOWERS

"And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:62.

One of the most distressing things about church service is the disappointment that comes from those who start so well and then fall out and fail in attendance and interest and activity. This condition certainly grieves the heart of any God-called pastor, but it grieves the Lord much more.

In the six verses constituting the final paragraph in the ninth chapter of Luke we find a very remarkable story. In it three unnamed men are presented. They are three types of professed followers of Christ during His earthly ministry. In all probability these same types are represented in this audience to which I am speaking. At any rate, we have an account of how Christ dealt with these three would-be followers of His.

Surely these three typical cases are placed together here for the comfort of those of us who preach the gospel of Christ. When we are disappointed, we may perceive that we are not any worse off than our Lord was. When we think that some have been saved and find, after all, that they have not been born into the family of God, we may not be discouraged and give up the work, but may say to ourselves, "It was always so; it was so with the Prince of preachers. May we not reasonably expect that it will be so with us also?"

In these six verses of scripture three incidents are related, with two verses given to each one. Three men suddenly appear, then just as suddenly they are gone. We never hear of them again, and the tantalizing brevity of it all leaves us wondering what became of them. These three instructive incidents speak plainly of Christ's concern for those who would be His followers, and of His frank words on the sacrifices involved in true discipleship. These three men heard from Christ Himself the cost of following Him and the mark of sacrifice in His followers. This passage, like many others in the Word of God, makes plain the fact that nothing must come between Christ and those who would follow Him. Our Lord applied the same test to each of these men in their different connections.

I. A Sad Spectacle.

1. Directed by emotion.

The first test was given to an ease-loving follower who proposed to go with Christ anywhere. Directed by emotion, he enthusiastically promised the Lord Jesus Christ, "I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest." The appeal to follow Christ so moved his emotions that he failed to count the cost of doing so.

This man did not think of the sacrifice involved in following Christ so the Lord Jesus reminded him of the hardships in connection with discipleship. He was quick to tell him what the cost would be. He said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." He was saying that any man who follows Him must count the cost and pay the price of sacrificing self.

Christ wants people to follow Him but it must be a real following that puts Him first. He knew this man's heart and knew that he desired his own ease first. He was quick to let him know that He could not promise him ease, that he must be willing to share Christ's cost and to sacrifice even that which foxes and birds have of comfort and ease. He said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air

have nests," but I do not have a home and My follower must be willing to love me more than home and bed and creature comforts.

This man, who was directed by emotion, was quick to profess to follow, but he was also very slow to pay the price of following. The way in which Christ leads is a glorious one but it is costly. No man ought to think that a profession even when made enthusiastically is enough. Churches are filled with members who joined them when they were stirred emotionally but they were not willing to count the cost. The churches are suffering from the indifference of such members who come when it suits their ease but never get under the load.

It is something to the credit of this professed disciple that he was a volunteer. He was evidently in a mood of great excitement. Having witnessed some of Christ's great deeds, his heart was stirred and he promptly volunteered to follow Him without really knowing what following Him meant. Emotional enthusiasm is not to be derided but it needs to be guarded by knowledge and wisdom. Without a trace of self-consciousness or self-depreciation, he said a thing no man has a right to say until he knows what the promise implies. He did not know the implications of that statement, "I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest."

An outstanding characteristic of this man was his impulsiveness. As soon as his emotions were stirred he was eager to become one of Christ's avowed and open disciples. Our Lord immediately confronted him with the realities of Christian discipleship. Whereas he had been accustomed to a comfortable home and a social position of honor, the way of Christ would lead to rejection, hardship and suffering.

Because our Lord was anxious for him to follow Him, He wanted him first to sit down and count the cost, for certainly he would have to pay the price. Christian, pray that the Lord will strengthen you enough for you to be willing to follow Him over the roughest places, in the most difficult tasks and through the toughest times.

This incident is a splendid illustration of Christ's distrust of emotionalism. That is how Christ dealt with the eager, impulsive, impetuous man by bringing him face to face with the hard, stern and pitiless facts. A fit of enthusiasm is not going to carry a man through the Christian life. It requires a fixed, dedicated and devoted will. That is why our Lord challenged the man to sit down first and count the cost. He confronted him with the hardships in His service. He sobered his enthusiasm with real facts. Unfortunately the man had not considered. He did not know. He was sincere as far as he knew, but he did not know much about discipleship. Had he known more he would have said less.

2. Devoted to sentiment.

The second test was given to a man who, when called to follow Christ, wanted to wait to bury his father. When Christ said to him, "Follow me," he replied, "Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father." Here was a man who was moved by sentiment for his family. He was willing to follow Christ except where his

family was involved. He was frank enough to say that Christ could not expect him to put his family second to anything. If the members of his family were visiting him or wanting him for anything, Christ must take second place to them. It is certainly commendable to love and care for our families but not when we put them ahead of following the Lord.

There is no proof that his father was yet dead but as a faithful son he wanted to stay at home and to look after his earthly father until the last and wait until he was dead and buried. Here was a man who was moved by sentiment and using it as an excuse for not following Christ. What the Lord Jesus saw in this man was a selfish excuse dressed up as a sentimental duty to his family. Knowing the heart of the man, Christ noted that he was putting sentiment first and using it to excuse himself from doing what he wanted to do. Our Lord wanted him to know that no sentimental tie, however tender, can excuse a real follower from doing his Christian duty. Christ reminded him that there was a higher tie and a more sacred duty -- the tie to Christ and the duty to place Him first always.

Churches are filled with sentimental members who talk piously about religion but refuse to put Christ first in their lives. Christ is not pleased with such professed followers. He wants those who love Him most and will follow Him closely. He does not want anybody to follow a husband or a wife, a son or a daughter, or even some friend instead of following Him. Sometimes church members talk about their love for Christ and His church and yet, if a member of the family or a friend gets angry and leaves the church, they put family or friend above Christ and leave the church too. Thank God for the testimony of those who do the humanly hard thing of putting Christ above the dearest of human ties.

"Suffer me to go and bury my father" is a proverb. It does not mean that his father was dead, and that he actually wanted to bury him. The man really meant that he wanted to attend to other duties first. He meant that after he had done all that might be required at his home he would be willing to follow Christ. Giving proverb for proverb Christ said, "Let the dead bury their dead." This oriental imagery means to let the people who have no higher aims attend to the lower things.

Because there were obstacles in the way of following Christ the man sought to delay doing so. His statement was only another way of saying, "My father is an old man. I must wait till he dies before I can become your disciple." There is no need to think that his father was even ill. The son simply wanted to delay following Christ and sought to do so on the ground of family obligations. No matter how sacred one's duties to his family, they come second to the duties that he owes to God.

3. Dominated by business.

The third test was given to a man who considered the cost of following Christ and wanted to follow Him but he was dominated by business. He said, "Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house." Here was a man who was moved by concern for his business. He wanted to go to put his business in order that he might not lose anything by his absence.

The Greek word here translated "bid farewell" literally means "to give instructions or orders" to his servants how to carry on his business. He wanted to assign special duties with reference to the things at home. He was not so much concerned with saying "goodbye" as he was to fix things at home for himself while he was gone. His attitude was that Christ should not expect him to put the Lord ahead of his own business. It would be necessary for him to fix his finances the way that he wanted them before he would yield to the will of Christ. He would not let Christ's cause cost him too much.

Christ knew this man's heart and knew that he was putting money-saving first and following the Lord second in his life. Our Lord wanted him to know that no money-saving service can be substituted for Christ-loving service. Churches are filled today with money-saving members who talk about loving Christ and His church but put money-saving ahead of Christ-serving. Christ wants His followers to love Him more than they do their pocket-books. No real follower of Christ ought to ask the Lord to let him substitute money-saving service for Christ-honoring sacrifice.

II. A Searching Statement

"And Jesus said unto him, "No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

The man who pretends to follow Christ and looks back for a place to rest or seeks an excuse to stop or keeps his eyes on the things back at home is not fit for the kingdom of God any more than he is fit for farming. The man who is pretending to follow Christ and is looking back to the things he left behind is not fit for His kingdom. This is a strong statement but it is our Lord's plain teaching.

It is not always bad things behind that we do not want to leave. It may be some mighty good things of natural life. It may be our families or our friends. But whatever makes us leave the plow handles and look back makes us unfit for the kingdom of God and dishonors Him and cripples His work and halts His church. Thank God for faithful plowmen who carry on the work and plow straight ahead amid all difficulties.