

# Conditional Discipleship

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[ 0 : 00 ] And I would ask the rest of us to look up the passage that we read together from Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 9 and from verse 57.

And it's really a case of following the theme that I mentioned with the children about commitment and looking at that theme as Jesus teaches about commitment.

And we're looking very much at the theme of the cost of commitment to Jesus Christ. I think sometimes in the society in which you live, commitment is a bit of a dirty word and people don't like to be committed to anything.

We are cynical of making commitment and cynical of the concept and that's a shame in many ways. I think also in the church sometimes we are afraid of commitment, not and I don't mean to the church, but to Jesus Christ.

[ 1 : 11 ] There's a danger that somehow we can, in our minds, imagine that there's two levels of Christianity, that there's an uncommitted, kind of silent, uninvolved commitment to Jesus where we maybe serably in our head believe in what he's done, but that we don't see the need to take it to the next stage of a very personal and wholehearted commitment to Jesus being absolutely first in our lives.

Or maybe we think we can be involved in a church, but we don't want to be members of a church because we think membership somehow is, well, it's just a human kind of construct anyway, but it's another level of commitment beyond ordinary belief and that oughtn't to be the case.

It ought to be simply a reflection of our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, just an outworking of that. And there isn't really two-stage Christianity of uncommitted and committed of those on the edges and those who are right at the core of things because Christ Jesus makes very clear here his standard and his challenge to us.

And I'd like to look at that for a few moments this morning. And I'd like to look at the context of the passage. Should have you read this passage today, you might have thought, ooh, it's a little bit harsh.

It's a harsh passage. It's harsh what Jesus is saying. And I want to unpack that a little bit throughout the service or throughout the sermon. But can we put it in its context, first of all, because it's primarily, it's a restatement of what, or it's a practical outworking of what Jesus has been saying in verse 22 of the chapter where he says, or verse 23, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, whoever wants to lose his life for my sake will find it.

[ 3 : 18 ] So in a sense it's a practical outworking of that as it's seen in his interaction with these three guys that he deals with here.

So it's a restatement of that amazingly radical teaching about commitment to him. It's also that passage we read in verse, from verse 57 to 62. It's a very sparse commentary on the events. We only have a very little bit of detail. We don't have all the background to these guys. We don't know where they were coming from. We don't know what else was said. It's really the bare bones. We don't know very much.

And that makes it quite difficult and it seems quite sparse, quite harsh on the basis of the information we have. But also we need to remember that Christ Jesus knows exactly, and sees exactly the things we can't see about what these men are saying to him.

He can see into their hearts. He knows their motives. He knows what's tempting them. He knows what is actually behind what they are saying. And so he brings them a personal challenge that's fitting to them and one that is really provocative for their lives.

[ 4 : 32 ] And we need to have that same sense of provocation sometimes from God and from His Word. So we have that context that we need to remember. And we need to remember the message that Jesus brings.

Throughout this whole chapter, really, and throughout the book, he says, Follow me! That is the core of the message that Jesus is bringing. He's speaking about discipleship. He's speaking very relevantly for us.

We're a Christian congregation. We're Christians. We're followers of Jesus. We're looking at that whole concept of discipleship. And the core of discipleship is follow me, he says.

Not follow some of me. Not follow me now and again. Not follow me when it's convenient, but wholehearted commitment. What I was speaking about to the children about Chris Hoy.

What he can do for three gold medals. We can do much more in terms of a wholehearted commitment for Jesus Christ. And that is at the very core again of what Jesus is teaching here.

[ 5 : 37 ] The message is follow me. And it's important for us to recognize the weight of the challenge. And by that, I mean the weight of the words of the one who has made the challenge.

Follow me, says Jesus. Why can he say that? And why is there such weight to his words? It's not like some random who passes in the street and would just say, Hey, by the way, follow me. We would say nuts. We would never do that.

We don't know anything about the person. But the weight of Jesus' invitation and indeed command is because of what he has done for us. And who he is, God, the author of life becomes flesh.

Lives in this world, dies on the cross in her place because of his love for us. Cost without limit.

Outstanding commitment to humanity and to you and to me.

Giving himself, which enables him with authority and with punch and with power to say, Follow me.

It is not some distant clockmaker who's wound up the world and is demanding allegiance in a way that we can't relate to.

[ 6 : 58 ] In a way that is insignificant or a way that is dictatorial. The weight of his invitation is on the basis of his nail pierced hands and feet.

His sacrificial and committed love for us. And that invitation or that command even is unchanged.

And I think it's easy for us to forget that the further maybe that we get away from Jesus Christ in terms of time. And also the more comfortable we are in religion and with religion.

It is easy for us to come to church and just not really think about Jesus Christ and his challenge and his word for us.

It may be, and maybe you've come to church today ritually. It's what you do on a Sunday drifting along to God's house. It may be because that's what you like doing and it's important from that level.

[ 8 : 00 ] It may be simply now for you as a Christian educational. I'm coming to learn. Maybe philosophical. I want to be challenged mentally and intellectually.

And the danger is sometimes we lose sight of the invitation and the challenge and the voice of God through the Spirit. Through his word saying, follow me.

Where the invitation and the challenge is a new made, freshly made for your life and mind to follow me. Hearing his voice.

Then there's a sense when we are used to church and we are coming to church that we lose the sense of urgency. Now let's be honest. Has there been an urgency today for us coming to God's house?

An urgency to be here. Urgency to be prepared spiritually. Urgency to hear God's voice for ourselves. I ask that question of myself and must do.

[ 9 : 01 ] And so must you. Looking for people that we love to come along and be arrested, reborn, transformed by the word of God.

Move from one place to another and very much move from a place of non-commitment to a place of commitment. The danger is that you come again and again to church and well, it's because it's what I always do.

And you remain in no man's land spiritually. Where Jesus says, follow me. I want all of you. And by that I mean, I want all of you as a congregation although he does as well.

As an individual, I want all of you. I want you all. I want every part of you. I want your commitment. I want your primacy. And so the challenge is along these lines.

And briefly in conclusion, looking at that challenge, we're going to unravel the flawed discipleship that is revealed and then understand what Jesus is teaching about true discipleship.

[10:06] Because we have these three guys. One says, I'll follow you wherever you go. Another says, I'll follow you but let me first go and bury my dead father. And then the third one says, I'll follow you but let me go back and say to you to my family.

Very reasonable. All of them. They seem to be. And there's a similarity about all three. And one thing that seems to be similar is their wrong ideas of what the kingdom of God is.

They are all focused very much on this life and on what they have to do in this life before they can become Christians and before they can follow Jesus. And they're thinking about permanence in this life, family and friends and all these kind of things.

But can we look at the two different ways? Firstly, the first man is not looking forward. He's not looking forward. I will follow you, he says, wherever you go. Jesus replies, if you're going to follow me, you're not going to have maybe what you're looking for.

You're not going to have that permanence that maybe you're seeking. Because I am not integrally part of this world, he says. I don't have anywhere to lay my head. And it's as if this man, and I'm making conjecture on the basis of Christ's response, is an enthusiast.

[11:29] He wants to, he's enthusiastic. I'll follow you Jesus, wherever you go. He likes the idea of being with Jesus. There's a great company of people. The atmosphere is nice. And he's heard that Jesus is going up to Jerusalem, and he's maybe going to get rid of the Roman authorities, and he's going to free Israel from Roman occupation.

He wants to be part of that. Lord Jesus, I'll follow you wherever you go. Kind of almost a radical revolutionary statement. He likes being in that company with Jesus.

But it doesn't seem that he had been listening to what Jesus had said, and the personal nature of discipleship. He hadn't been listening to the fact that we need to deny ourselves and give up everything in order to follow him in our hearts.

Nor had he possibly been listening to what Jesus was saying about his kingdom not being of this world. In other words, Jesus might be saying, listen friend, the party's going to be over soon.

It's a spiritual revolution, and it will start in your heart. It's not about following me up to Jerusalem. It's not about getting a great important place in my revolutionary kingdom, in my revolutionary parliament.

[12:39] Listen, it's completely different, and it starts with your soul. It starts with your relationship and your heart. And it's as if he challenges that in this man. But then the other two, it wasn't that they were not looking forward, as this guy seems to mean, but they were actually looking back.

It seems that their requests are quite reasonable on the surface, but they're looking back. The first guy says, first let me go and bury my father. Now there's a lot of conjecture about what this means, because some commentators think, well his father wasn't even dead.

It doesn't say that his father's dead. Now that he wasn't going to go home and bury him alive, but rather that he was saying, let me fulfill my family obligations whenever these family obligations actually happen.

And I've got an obligation to be the one who will be involved in the burial of my father. And however many years ahead that is, then let me go and do that first, and take care of these family things, and then I'll think about following you.

It may have been that. And then the other guy speaks about going back, going back again and saying goodbye to my family. And again on the surface it seems a reasonable request.

[13:48] But it may well have been that it was an excuse for him. He was using that. Jesus challenges him to follow him, and he says, I will follow you Lord, I will sometime in the future.

But can I go back and say to you, my friends first and my family, and as he goes off, he thinks, they'll dissuade me. And I'll be out of Jesus company and I'll not need to listen to his challenge again.

And he may have been using it as a reason for not coming back, because Jesus says to him, no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back, is fit for the kingdom of heaven. There's a lot we don't know, but we do know from Jesus' responses that they could well have been people who were wavering, who were in two minds. They loved their family and friends, the permanence of this life, the responsibilities here, a false view of Jesus, and when Jesus gave them his true teaching and his true challenge, we don't know how they responded. We don't have the end of the story.

But Jesus was challenging them in areas where they were struggling. And God was very instructive. Jesus is a great psychiatrist, a great psychologist, a great counsellor, a great God, a great master, a great leader who knows our hearts and who challenges in our hearts.

And he says, for us today it may be that you can associate with some of these particular reasons for not being committed. Maybe you're content, in a sense, like the first guy, to be among the kind of atmosphere of Christians and Christ and Christ people.

[15:32] You like it, you're excited by it. It's convenient to be part of the church. You like the atmosphere, you like coming along, you like the people. But you know that Christ isn't touching your heart, and you know that your commitment to Him goes no further than the people of the church who belong into the church. You like the atmosphere, you like the kind of security of it all.

But the pool of this life ultimately is greater and you're torn between two. And you don't want to be committed in your heart to Jesus. It's a great danger, Jesus says, in two minds.

These guys must have been in two minds, living for this life rather than living for Christ, not letting Christ have preeminence. Other things, family, friends, responsibilities, legitimate in their own right. But if they take the primary place, the preeminent place in our lives, before Christ, then Christ says, no, no, that can't be.

And as we conclude, we'll see why that is significant. It's not a harsh demand that He makes on us. And if you're in that position today, please listen not to what I am saying, but I hope what the Spirit is saying through His word and the preaching of His word about that and about the importance of being committed, not half-hearted, not on the edges, not on the periphery, not with a foot in both camps, but committed to Jesus Christ as He wants.

[17:15] Because not only do we have to unravel the flawed discipleship here, but we have to understand the true discipleship that Jesus is looking for. Not the kind of top of the range kind of model of discipleship, as if that's for one or two people in the stratosphere of Christian living.

It's not kind of graded like that. And that's me down at the bottom, kind of now and again believer in Jesus every so often. But Jesus doesn't have the kind of gradations of commitment and of belief. It is all or nothing, really, for Jesus Christ.

So He reminds us here of the importance of understanding true discipleship. And that must involve, whatever it must involve, it must involve facing up to the eternal.

Jesus in several places here talks about the Kingdom of God. The guys who have come to Him have kind of had their idea of permanence on family and friends and commitment on things in this world.

But Jesus again and again speaks about belonging to the Kingdom of God. Something that is not temporal, but something that's eternal. And the discipleship is a recognition of that.

[18:34] That we come to faith in Jesus and we belong, we're reborn, as it were, and we recognize that we belong to a spiritual domain, a spiritual kingdom.

And we're fellowshiping with our heavenly Father. And tonight we're going to look at God as Spirit. And that kind of backs up what we're saying. It's an everlasting Kingdom. There's a great verse in 2 Corinthians.

And you can look that up, chapter 4 verse 18. He says, So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

And it's a basic principle of the Kingdom that we belong to His spiritual domain, where He is our King and our Lord. That is radically counter-cultural. And it makes the world look, as it say, we're nuts.

Okay? But we don't live as Christians. It's not that we despise this world. It's not that we don't belong at one level, because God has made us in this world.

[19:40] But we live in this world, but we don't live for this world as if it's all there is. As if all we're living for is until the day we die. And we make the most of it.

As if that's all there is. We live spiritually, because we belong to Christ. And our permanence is not in bricks and mortar, and it's not even in family and friends.

However important they are, because they're gifts from God. But our permanence is in Christ and in His Lordship and in the spiritual Kingdom to which we belong. It's utterly radical. And so we can be half-hearted.

We can't say, well, I like a little bit of it now and again, because we are moving from one domain to another, when we become Christians and we face up to the eternal.

And true discipleship not only involves that, and as Christians I think we're challenged by that, because so much of our lives can be geared towards this life and what I'm doing today, and my burdens and my mortgage and my demands and my family and my job and everything.  
[ 20 : 48 ] And these are not unimportant, but as Christians we look at them differently, because we belong to a spiritual Kingdom. It's not all there is. It's not what's primary to us.

But also discipleship involves being willing to lose our life. That's going back to what Jesus said in verse 23, He must take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for me will save it.

And whatever else these guys said, and however reasonable their reasons for not following Him immediately seem to be, somehow we must recognize that they were unwilling to lose their lives. They wanted to cling on to being in control and being first and doing their own thing before serving Christ. It means losing. They weren't willing to lose that lordship of their own lives.

It's a massive challenge for us all as Christians, and it's an ongoing challenge. In fact, I think the more you go on, the harder it is. I got an email the other day from somebody in their 40s, like myself.

[ 21 : 59 ] I know I don't look at that, but that's the reality. Who was saying that it's harder being a Christian now in their 40s, and they became a Christian in their 20s. Than it ever was in a student or a young person. The temptations are greater, the trials are greater, the struggles are greater.

And maybe as young people sometimes you don't think that, but in many ways it never ceases to be a challenge for us to be radically people who are willing to hold loosely to the things of this world and lose our sovereign control over our own lives and give it over to Christ.

And of course, though the older we get, because we see life slipping away. But that losing our life, what does it mean? It means giving God first place. Pre-eminence. Not second place. Not first place at 11 o'clock, or 10 past, or quarter past, or 20 past, or 11 on a Sunday.

Not first place just for a few moments when we read our Bible, but pre-eminent lordship of our lives. We invite Him to be king of all that we are, to give us spiritual life and to renew us in fellowship with Him.

That we are living for His glory, that He is number one, that He is the one that we respond to, that He is our first love, and that by grace we can see why it's good for Him to be first.

[ 23 : 29 ] God's first place. A great challenge to, I think, all of us, if we're honest with ourselves, lordship. I mean, I was thinking, you know, when you're preaching about something, you're often thinking about it.

I was thinking about it this morning, thinking, well, it's astonishing how much of my life is driven by self-desire. And they need to be aware of that and to challenge it and to say, well, am I doing what I want, or is it what Christ wants?

Is He Lord really, or am I sovereign? So it's about losing our life at that level. And that loss of life involves also a sense of suffering for Jesus Christ, taking up our cross and following Him.

By dealing with our sinful wills, by rooting out the things that separate us from Christ, a painful experience. By also standing up and being associated with Jesus Christ. That's one of the things about making a public commitment.

You're saying, I'm willing to stand and belong to Jesus Christ and tell whoever asks me, I'm not going to be a secret disciple, but I'm willing to suffer for Jesus Christ by making a public stand and saying, I'm a Christian. I can do no other.

[ 24 : 43 ] He is my Lord and Savior, and we will suffer simply as a result of being Christians. People say, what? You're daft. And they'll suffer. They'll suffer from that stand.

But losing our life does, and we must remember, it also involves knowing new life in Christ. It's losing an old mentality, an old lordship, an old way of thinking, which is sin reigning and which is lost.

And gaining new life in Christ, where when we take Jesus to be our Savior, we know His life in our life. We know His love. We know forgiveness. We know freedom from the power of selfish lordship. We know His grace. We know joy. And we know just contentment and fulfillment in a way that we can never gain by leaving God out of our lives and by only living for family and friends and by only living for success and ambition.

He says so clearly, seek me first. Seek first my kingdom. And all these things will be added to you. He's a benevolent, loving, gracious, kind, caring, providing Father.

[ 26 : 07 ] And He says, look, if you give me my rightful place as your Creator and Sustainer and Judge and Savior, if you come to me by faith and if you keep me there, no blessing and no life and life to the full, it's not a meager and a miserly request He makes, but He is challenging you and challenging me, challenging me and us as Christians to a renewal of commitment.

And if you're not a Christian or maybe you are a Christian but you're kind of in no man's land, as it were. You don't know whether you are or not and you haven't made a commitment, then the call comes surely from God's word, follow me.

Whatever that, and that will mean something different for every single person here. No one will, it will not be the same demand on anyone to put Jesus Christ first, to make Him Lord and the cost of commitment.

Please don't think that there are levels and stages of commitment that we can be content with, but that we would give Him all of what we are at what particular stage of life we are at.

Please consider that commitment, not only for your own soul, but also for the work of the Kingdom of which your involvement in St. Columbus is very important.

[ 27 : 36 ] We don't in any way think that this is an exclusive work of the Kingdom, far from it, but this is a local church and we want you to be committed to the work of Christ's Kingdom through the local church.

This congregation needs your commitment, hopeless if it's one or two people at the front, tearing their head out, trying to do everything, because what happens is that we do things badly.

But all as we are committed to Christ and serving Christ and following Christ, we will know blessing and fullness. Now I'm going to pray together, and I'm going to pray. One of the things I'm going to pray about today is thanksgiving for our financial contributions to the church.

The play has been brought to the table today, and we know that people give different ways, not just through the play, but through standing orders and all kinds of things. We're very grateful for everyone who gives sacrificially to the work, because we recognise that the work here can't go on without that evidence and without that commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ in a financial way.

So we're very grateful for that, and we are going to give thanks for that, and recognise the ongoing need we have to be financially committed to His cause. I'm also going to remember Becky, who's away on Tuesday to France for the year, and we will miss you, and I hope that you will miss us, and we will pray for you in your work there.

[ 29 : 07 ] We give thanks to God for John and Sarah Johnson for their new baby Anna Marry. They're not here today, they're up in Aberdeen, but also if you don't know to give thanks to God for Elizabeth, Elizabeth who was born to Gurhan and El-Chin, our friends in Istanbul who we pray for and their work.

So they've got now two boys and a lovely little girl, so we want to pray for them. So let's bow our heads in thanksgiving and pray for these things today. Lord God, we give thanks for your challenge to us.

We thank you that it is fresh and that it is real, and it moves us to our hearts, and we rejoice that you're the God who does challenge us and not leave us in places that are unhealthy or dull, because we know so often we can make our Christian commitment to you dull, and it can be a real drag because we're not committed, and when we're not committed then it's the worst in a sense of both worlds.

Lord, help us to see the whole heartedness and the blessing and commitment. We see it physically in this world, we see it with the example of Chris Hoy, and in an earthly way we see that, the rewards of commitment, and how much more so in love and in gratitude should we be committed to Jesus and see the rewards of fellowship and blessing and obedience to Jesus Christ.

We pray, Lord God, for the giving that have been given to the church today in the box, and also we know the ongoing giving that people give regularly, and we thank you for that commitment from everyone here, for the ministry that is able to continue, for the missionaries we are able to support, for just generally the ongoing work that we're engaged in here in the city centre, and we know that that is expensive, and we simply give thanks for the ability to do what we have done and continue to do that in the months and years that lie ahead.

[ 31 : 15 ] We pray for Becky as she goes to France on Tuesday, protect her Lord and keep her safe, make be a fruitful and a beneficial year, may she find Christian company in the Christian church, and may she be blessed in her studies, and may we be aware of supporting her and being committed to her, and may she also pray for us.

We thank you too for new births in the congregation and those connected with the congregation.  
We thank you for Anna and also for Elizabeth, and we pray for your blessing on these beautiful little girls, and we ask that you keep them safe and well.  
We thank you for their families, we thank you for their siblings, and we pray and ask Lord God that we would rejoice, and give thanks with those who rejoice and give thanks today.  
So here is we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.