

### The Hard Sayings of Jesus

To state the obvious, it's not easy to be a disciple of Jesus. Some of the things Jesus says are just plain hard. Hard to understand; even harder to do. Entire books have been written about some of his "hard sayings," like the well-known book by New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce (entitled *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*) in which he tackles no fewer than 70 such sayings. As if putting them together into one book somehow makes them easier. Which it doesn't. Or as if buying this book allows you to simply put it on your shelf, forget about it, and then never have to think about these questions again. Which it doesn't. Not if you ever so much as open your Bible to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. There is just no escaping the hard sayings of Jesus.

This morning's story from the Gospel of Luke gives us a snapshot of what life as a disciple of Jesus is like. Its opening verse sets an ominous tone that unfortunately never lets up. "When the days drew near for him to be taken up . . . ." We'd like to pretend that that verse doesn't actually mean what we in the bottom of our hearts know it means. We'd like to think that it's referring to Jesus being taken up into the mountains for a fun vacation. Or maybe being taken up into a hot air balloon for a wonderful early morning adventure, with an incredible view. But at the bottom of our hearts we know that Luke is really referring to Jesus being taken up on the cross.

At this point in the story, no one else knew about the cross, but Jesus knew. Which is why Luke says "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." A curious expression through which Luke gives us a glimpse of Jesus'—what—resignation? Determination? Courage? Fear? Acceptance? Conviction?

What do you think? [Gesture to *picture* on bulletin.] Did any of Jesus' disciples notice the change in Jesus' face/expression? They surely knew their road would take them through Samaria. They knew the animosity they would face there. The Samaritans didn't like the Jews. And vice-versa. Why couldn't they all just get along in the first century? (For that matter, why can't we, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?)

Sure enough, the Samaritans in the first village they came to said "no way. Jerusalem isn't our holy city! What's the matter? Isn't our Mt. Gerazim good enough for you?" The brothers James and John were infuriated. They wanted to "call down fire from heaven" upon the village. Luke simply says that Jesus "turned and rebuked them." Nobody likes to be rebuked. Especially us disciples. Especially by Jesus himself. Aren't we allowed to be angry sometimes?! We don't know what exactly Jesus said in his rebuke, but it was probably something like "anger like that has no place in God's kingdom." We can consider that one of Jesus' hard sayings.

That's the point where the bold, brash statements began. "Jesus, forget the Samaritans. *I will follow you wherever you go.*" How easy that is to say . . . and to think we mean it. This would-be disciple undoubtedly thought he meant it, that his words of determined promise were sincere. Downright admirable, right? We should pat him on the back. (And while we're at it, let's pat ourselves on the back as well.)

But Jesus says in response, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*" "And neither do his followers," Jesus apparently

didn't need to add. It's ironic, isn't it? God gave his creatures everything they would need. Things to eat. Places to sleep. And if you're really big and strong, rich and successful, you can even have more than you need. Large mansions with 20 bedrooms, and at least that many bathrooms. But not if you want to follow the Son of Man. Once you make that decision, you have to give all of that up. Are we sure we're ready to do that?

A second man said, "I'm ready. *But first let me go and bury my father.*" That's a reasonable request, right? Especially in first-century Palestine, where burying one's father was one of the most important things one could do. In fact, it was a matter of honor. Honor for your father, honor for you. How can Jesus say no to that?

*"Let the dead bury their own dead"* is what Jesus actually says. Talk about non-sensical! How can dead people bury dead people? Are you saying, Jesus, that our traditions of honoring our deceased loved ones (like we did yesterday not once but twice) are a waste of time? That all life ends in death, and we may as well accept that fact? Or, are you saying that if we say we want to follow you and be your disciples, there are going to be all kinds of excuses, all kinds of reasons to keep putting it off, all kinds of things we "need" to do first? That even something as legitimately important as burying our dead is not as important as following you? Whatever the cost? Whatever we might have to give up? Is that what you're saying, Jesus?

A third man said, "*I will follow you, Lord. I will follow you. But let me first say farewell to those at my home.*" "Of course," we imagine Jesus saying. "Take whatever time you need! Do what you need to do! Our families and friends are the most important people in our lives." But a distant, nagging memory pops up somewhere in the back of our mind. Didn't Jesus say something, somewhere, about how we should actually hate our father and mother? Being people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we Google it, and . . . there it is. Also in Luke. *Chapter 14, verse 26.* "*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*"

That's too much, Jesus! That's way too hard. That's too high of a cost. And anyway, it's not even part of this morning's lesson; it's five whole chapters later. Let's just forget about it for now; we'll come back to it another time.

Okay, but what Jesus says to that would-be disciple in this morning's lesson is this: "*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*" [Angry] What are we supposed to do with that, Jesus? First of all, we're not farmers! Well, some of us are, but not all of us. Does anyone here understand what Jesus is saying?

One of the commentators I read took a stab at it. He said that when you're plowing, it's essential that you keep your eyes in front of you. Why? So that your furrows are straight. If you look back, and meanwhile your cow or ox or horse or mule or tractor or whatever keeps going, your rows are not going to be straight. They're going to be crooked.

Huh. Keep our eyes on what's in front. But Jesus, that's okay for maybe our children, or even young adults whose lives are still mostly in front of them. But for many of us, the largest portion of our lives is behind us! How can we not look back? But there it is: "*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*"

Huh. The past is past. It cannot be altered. The future can. The future is where God is at work. The future is where the Kingdom of God lies. Huh. That kind of makes sense. But I'm going to have to give that some more thought.

"No more excuses," Jesus says. "Follow me."

