

## ✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

Thank you for being part of this sermon. With your permission (and even without it) I'm about to question your faith.

Pastors are actually supposed to do this, even when people don't like it and insist, "Don't ever question my faith." Truth be told, Christians are supposed to do this for each other, but in a loving way that lifts our hearts closer to Jesus and closer to each other.

It will help us question each other's faith effectively if we join Jesus on the next leg of his journey toward the cross, where he will pay the penalty for the sins of the whole world, where he will earn the right to be trusted as Savior and to require of his followers that they **FOLLOW THE LORD WITH ALL their HEART.**

The evangelist Luke reports: <sup>51</sup>*As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.* He knew how much it would hurt to rescue us from sin, but he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem anyway. See how much he loves us? See how much he demands of himself in order to redeem us from sin and its consequences?

Jesus <sup>52</sup>*sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him;* <sup>53</sup>*but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.* Which

messengers did Jesus send? Some of the Twelve? Was it James and John? Is that why they got so hot when the Samaritans didn't welcome Jesus?

We can't be sure of all these details, so keep separate the historical facts from the speculation. I like to imagine that it was James and John who went into the village to get things ready for Jesus so he could stay there overnight and have a meal, maybe interact with the people of the village, bring them the good news as he had at another Samaritan village (see John 4). But when these Samaritans learned that Jesus was headed toward Jerusalem, they snapped up the welcome mat and refused to let Jesus come in to their village. Why did they get so huffy? It likely had to do with the ongoing strife between the Jews and the Samaritans. Fact: the two groups had not gotten along for the previous 550 years. Fact: the Jews wouldn't let the Samaritans enter the Temple in Jerusalem and worship the Lord there with the Israelites, so the Samaritans had built an opposition temple on Mt. Gerizim. Apparently at some point the Jews had gone to Mt. Gerizim and burned down the Samaritan temple. Perhaps the Samaritans' thinking went something like this: "Here comes Jesus, and he's supposed to be some holy man, and yet he is resolutely headed to Jerusalem and not to our Mt. Gerizim? If he thinks he can snub us and our religion like that, then we aren't going to help him on his journey, not with our rooms, not with our food."

Now we don't know if that's what they actually said, but whatever they said got Jesus' disciples riled up, because Luke reports: <sup>54</sup>*When the disciples James and John saw how the Samaritans treated Jesus, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"* Some copies of Luke have a few more words, "shall we call down fire *even as Elijah did?*"

Are you familiar with the Bible history James and John are referring to? One of the wicked kings of Israel sent some soldiers to bring him the great prophet Elijah, by force if necessary. 2 Kings 1 reports: <sup>9b</sup>*The captain went up to Elijah...and said to him, "Man of God, the king says, 'Come down!'"* <sup>10</sup>*Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.* Just like that they were dead. Sometimes God doesn't mess around. That's one good reason it is never wise to keep doing what you know is evil in God's sight. If you see me doing what you know is evil in God's sight, you question my faith. That's how we help each other stay on the path following Jesus.

James and John thought this was one of those times when God shouldn't mess around. That's why they offered to call down fire from heaven on those

ungrateful Samaritans. {Was this one of the incidents which led Jesus to give James and John the nickname "Sons of Thunder" (see Mark 3:17)?} "And while we're at it," James and John said to Jesus, "do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy the people of Lake City? There are too many people in that town who don't welcome those who try to bring them God's Word. And there are too many members of St. John's who use the naughty word 'damn' in their regular speech as if it has nothing to do with the hot place that God doesn't want anyone to go. St. John's has too many members who express mere emotion with 'O my god!' as if the Second Commandment doesn't apply to them, or they knock on wood as if this will keep the good luck going. It gets worse. Not enough members there care about mission work or evangelism." Dear friends, when a non-Christian can look at the way Christians behave and say, "Achh, even I live better than they do," it's not Christ's fault that He's not welcome in some Lake City homes. Shouldn't fire fall on us?

But fire did not come down from heaven and consume the Samaritan village that day. <sup>55</sup>*Jesus turned and rebuked James and John because he hadn't come to destroy people's lives but to save them.* <sup>56</sup>*And they went to another village.*

James and John may have been disappointed as they walked away with Jesus, but Jesus gave that village a worse punishment than what fell on the 51 soldiers of Israel. Think about it. Jesus healed no sick there. He preached no sermon, took no children into his arms to bless them, forgave no sins.

At this point some people will ask, “If Jesus can withhold God’s Word from people, why do we have to care about sharing the gospel with others?” But Jesus always gets things right, whereas it would be the opposite of following Jesus to join Jonah in his hateful outlook toward the Ninevites, to get on a ship and go the other way when you know that if you just share God’s Word with people, that’s how the Holy Spirit brings them to faith in Jesus. God wants us to care where people will spend eternity, to recognize that we have the authority and the resources to share his love with them.

Has your faith been sufficiently questioned? Are you sure you want to FOLLOW THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART? Do we grasp that to follow Jesus is to walk behind him out of sin and toward God? Three men did not grasp what “following Jesus” means.

<sup>57</sup>*As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”* According to the

details Matthew (8:19) supplies, this first man was a scribe, a teacher of Jewish laws. Most of the scribes were enemies of Jesus because he questioned their faith. He even pointed out their hypocrisies so that everyone could see them for who they were. But this scribe was so impressed with Jesus that he volunteered to become one of his disciples. God’s Word can have this effect on people. Jesus, however, can look into people’s hearts. (He is true God.) He saw that this man didn’t understand what he was getting into. <sup>58</sup>*Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”* Was this man willing to give up his home, if called on to do so, in order to remain with Jesus? Are you aware that it can cost you everything to keep following Jesus? To serve the Lord with all your heart is to follow Jesus no matter what the cost.

Jesus then <sup>59</sup>*said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”* This second man seems ready to follow Jesus. All he wants is time to honor his father. Is there any family duty more sacred than giving your parents a fine funeral? But Jesus wants us to know that following him will sometimes pit family loyalties against loyalty to Jesus. Yet if the gospel is the only way that the Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Jesus, the gospel is

even more important than family. There are times that to delay following Jesus is the same as rejecting him.

So <sup>60</sup>*Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* Makes me wonder if this man was using his father's burial as an excuse, and Jesus knew it. You see a Jewish burial was more than just the funeral. Besides the burial, there was the mourning period and the subsequent purification. It could take weeks or months before the man was ready to go. Jesus was traveling now. Should Jesus pause his mission and wait around for this man? \*What loyalties do you have that conflict with following Jesus? Do you ever make Jesus wait while you take care of less important things? "Jesus, my weekend guest doesn't like you. I'm setting aside church to spend time with my guest." Seriously? You want Jesus to wait?

<sup>61</sup>*Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."* This man only wants to say good-bye to his family. What's wrong with that? Elijah let Elisha do this (1 Kings 19:19-21). But Jesus can read hearts, and this man's heart was divided. Would he be able to maintain his desire to serve the Lord when he went to his family and saw what he was leaving behind? Would they try to persuade him to stay at home

when they found out what he was planning? When you think about it, it's common for people to leave family behind for a job or for a military operation overseas. Why should anyone think it harsh that Jesus requires an undivided heart in those who would follow him?

<sup>62</sup>*Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."* Maybe this has happened to you while you were mowing the lawn. Your attention wandered and you left a swath of uncut grass. But let's flip this around so you can see things from God's point of view. I am your servant, am I not? What if I said, "I'm sorry folks, I was too busy to write a sermon for you this week. I had to pound stakes to hold up my tomatoes, and my guitar music needed some organization." Would you accept that from me? I hope not. God, the One who created us, preserves us, redeemed us and daily washes us clean in Jesus' blood, wants our very best too. He wants us paying attention to the gospel ministry he has placed into the hands of St. John's people. He wants us to line our priorities up with his, no matter what the cost and without delay or excuse. As one African Christian said it in prayer, "Dear Lord, You be the needle, and I'll be the thread. You go first, and I will follow wherever you lead."