

## Did Jesus Really Say That?

### "Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead"

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*This text is from a transcription of a recent sermon by Rev. Kevin Labby. It has been transcribed verbatim and edited by Copilot AI, along with additional review and editing by the theological staff at Third Millennium Ministries.*

So let me begin this second message in our series with a question: Did Jesus really say that?

If you're new to our church, you may be wondering what that even means. The truth is, Jesus said many things that we immediately understand—words that sound beautiful and comforting. Who wouldn't love a God who says, "Bring me all your burdens, and I will carry them for you"? Or, "My peace I give to you—not as the world gives, but my peace I give to you." Those are words we gladly embrace.

But if you read the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—sooner or later you hit a speed bump. Jesus says something that jars you, something that makes you stop and ask, What could He possibly mean? Some of His sayings aren't just difficult; at times they sound downright offensive. That's why we've built this fall series around them. Not to stir up more controversy—you get enough of that on social media—but to show that beneath the hard sayings lies a healing and hopeful truth.

If you're here today as a skeptic, maybe visiting with a friend, I hope you'll at least listen in as we wrestle with Christ's words. We don't follow Him perfectly, but we do seek to understand His teaching. And perhaps, as you listen, you'll glimpse something of the God we serve.

Let me give you an illustration. Imagine walking up to someone's house and overhearing a conversation inside. Suppose you hear, "If you don't get out of here, I'm going to squash you like a bug!" Would you feel welcome entering that home? Probably not. But once inside, you realize they weren't talking to you at all—they were dealing with a stink bug in the living room. Context changes everything.

That's how it is with some of Jesus' sayings. Out of context, they sound harsh or confusing. But when we listen carefully, we discover they are life-giving words, perfectly suited to His audience—and to us.

Here's the central truth I want us to consider today: *What claims our allegiance will capture our affections.*

Think back to elementary school, when you learned the Pledge of Allegiance. You stood, faced the flag, placed your hand over your heart, and pledged loyalty to your country. Allegiance is loyalty—it's giving priority to something we value above all else. And whatever claims our allegiance inevitably captures our hearts.

Practically speaking, if career advancement claims your allegiance, then your passion, energy, and even identity will be wrapped up in it. If comfort or security is your highest allegiance, your life will gravitate toward what feels safe. If your allegiance is your marriage, you will order your life around it. Many of these are good things—family, work, rest, achievement. All are gifts of God. But when they become ultimate—when they outrank Christ—they begin to shape our lives more than God does.

Jesus knows that wherever our allegiance is directed, our affections will follow. Unless He is our first and highest allegiance, He will never truly be first in our hearts.

This morning, we'll see Jesus confront three would-be disciples in Luke 9:57–62. Each has competing priorities, and Jesus responds by describing the kind of followers He seeks. These are hard sayings, but in context they reveal His call to wholehearted allegiance.

So let's turn together to Luke 9:57–62. As we read, remember: this is not merely Luke's account. Scripture tells us that the writers spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. These are God's words to us.

Prayer:

Father, we thank You for Your Word, and we pray this morning that You would open it to us. We know that apart from the work of Your Spirit, we could spend our lives studying the Bible and still miss its true meaning. Yet by Your Spirit, we can understand it as You intend, and even passages that seem confusing at first can draw us closer to You. So, Lord, I ask that You open hearts today to receive Your truth, to believe, and to begin the discipleship that Jesus offers. May we grow in His grace, and in learning to love Him above all else, may we love everything else in our lives more faithfully because we have loved You first. Father, this is only possible by Your grace, and so we seek it in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **Exposition**

Now, some may ask: Doesn't this passage contradict what Jesus taught elsewhere? Isn't He being a little cruel when He says, "Let the dead bury their own dead"? At first glance, it can sound contradictory. But we know Jesus was not cruel, and He did not contradict Himself.

Remember, Jesus said He did not come to abolish God's law but to fulfill it — down to the smallest detail. He declared that not even the tiniest mark of the law would disappear until all was fulfilled. So when we read His words here, we must be careful not to assume contradiction.

Take the Fifth Commandment: *Honor your father and your mother*. Jesus fulfilled this perfectly. He loved His parents and cared for His mother to the very end. Even as He hung on the cross, He entrusted Mary's care to John, the disciple He loved. Jesus honored His mother faithfully. So it cannot be that He is contradicting Himself, nor that He is being cruel.

## **Context Matters**

The key is context. Scripture must always be read in its proper setting. Too often, verses are plucked out and misused. That's why we turn to Luke 9. This chapter marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry.

In verse 51, Luke writes: "*When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.*" That phrase — He set His face — means He was resolute. Nothing would deter Him. From this point forward, every step He took was toward the cross. He was walking deliberately toward His mission: to die for our sins, not His own.

So the conversations He has along the way are all about what it means to follow Him completely.

## **The Cost of Discipleship**

Verses 57–58 tell us: "As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, 'I will follow You wherever You go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'"

Notice what Jesus does. He doesn't congratulate the man for his boldness. Instead, He presses on the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus is not a path to

comfort or convenience. It is not a cozy add-on to our lifestyle. It is a call to reorient everything around Him.

Yes, God may graciously grant us stability or blessings, but discipleship at its core means surrendering them if necessary. It is not suffering for suffering's sake, nor conflict for conflict's sake. But it is a willingness to give up comfort, security, even relationships, when obedience to Christ demands it.

We know people who have faced this cost. A worker who refused to compromise integrity for profit. A student who chose to defend the outcast rather than join in gossip. Each paid a price — losing friends, losing status, losing ease. Yet in those moments, they chose Jesus above all.

## **The Second Encounter**

Then in verse 59, Jesus calls another man directly: “Follow Me.” The man replies respectfully, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” Notice the tension. He calls Jesus “Lord,” acknowledging His authority, yet immediately places conditions on obedience. He wants to follow, but on his own terms, his own schedule.

He says, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” At first glance, this seems entirely reasonable. Yet most scholars agree Jesus wasn't speaking to someone whose father was on life support or near death. More likely, the man was saying, “Let me stay with my father until the end, and then I'll follow you.” In other words: “Later. Someday. Not now.” This wasn't about tomorrow's funeral—it was about indefinite postponement.

Jesus' reply is startling: “Let the dead bury their own dead.” He is not scorning family responsibilities. Scripture is clear: to neglect one's family is worse than unbelief. Jesus is not commanding dishonor toward parents. Instead, He is distinguishing between those spiritually dead to God and those alive in Him. To follow Christ means embracing a greater urgency than ordinary obligations. And here, unlike the previous encounter, Jesus adds a positive command: *“But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*

This is not merely about refusing family-first excuses. It is about saying yes to a kingdom-first mission. Allegiance to Jesus means proclaiming His kingdom, telling others about Him, and living with urgency defined by His call. This does not mean abandoning family—it means that when the kingdom calls, it must come first if Christ is truly Lord.

Luke 9:61–62 gives us a third episode: *“I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at home.”* Again, it sounds innocent. What harm is there in saying goodbye? Yet Jesus insists: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and

looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Twice men call Him “Lord,” and twice they add, “But let me first...” That is the contradiction of half-discipleship.

Jesus illustrates with the image of a farmer. To plow straight rows, the farmer must keep his eyes forward. Look back, and the lines go crooked. Divided allegiance is no allegiance at all. To follow Jesus, our eyes must be fixed on Him—forward, not backward.

So how do we wrestle with this? The good news is that perseverance is possible. If we keep pressing on, we will not be left alone. What claims our allegiance will capture our affection. And that affection will shape our lives.

Here are a few takeaways:

1. The Law of God makes demands. It exposes our tendency to make excuses: “I’ll follow Christ after graduation... after the kids are grown... after life slows down.” The law shines a light on our delay.
2. The Gospel delivers. The good news is not that we suddenly get our act together. It is that Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem for us. Everything we have failed to do, every good left undone, He bore at the cross. “He who knew no sin became sin for us.” He suffered the penalty we deserved, so that we might be forgiven.
3. The Spirit empowers. Jesus does not leave us in failure. He calls us to take up our cross daily and follow Him. And because He ascended, He promised we would not be left as orphans.

The message is clear: divided allegiance is no allegiance. Christ calls us to a kingdom-first life, empowered by His Spirit, sustained by His grace, and marked by joy in following Him.

“I have walked with you for three and a half years. I have loved you to the very end. I will not leave you. I will send you another Comforter — the Counselor, the Holy Spirit. And when the Spirit comes, you will do even greater things than these.” The Spirit is now at work in all of God’s children, in all of Christ’s disciples — one and the same.

The second thing I want you to see is this: Jesus means now. Not later. There is urgency in his words. He did not say, “Take your time.” He said, “We are leaving now. Are you coming with me?” Most said no. A few said yes. And this morning, I invite you to be among those who say yes when Jesus calls, “Follow me.” Just say yes. Just follow. If you have questions, bring them along. We can talk on the way. If you wonder what your life will look like, I wonder too — but we will discover it together as we walk with him. What matters is this: a decision about Jesus is never something to postpone. It is always for today.

If we follow, we follow him into forgiveness. We follow him into a new kind of life — uncertain at first, but revealed as freedom. That life will yield an abundance of flourishing beyond anything we could imagine, even though it may cost us much. Yet Christ shows us that what feels like loss is, in truth, gain.

Thirdly, Jesus is above everything. He is before everything. Honoring parents, caring for family, working diligently, succeeding in school or career — all of these are good. Scripture says, “Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.” But above all these things, Jesus must be supreme. And when he is, we will do all those things differently. At times it will cost us, but we will not regret the cost. Just as the cross led to the joy of resurrection, whatever we surrender will be returned many times over in the kingdom to come.

Fourthly, prioritizing Jesus means proclaiming him. In verse 60, Jesus does not only say, “Follow.” He says, “Go and proclaim the kingdom.” Discipleship is not merely private allegiance; it is public witness. People should know you are a Christian not because of loud words on social media, but because you love them, care for them, and bless them. When you love Jesus enough to love others, your circle of influence becomes a testimony to his kingdom.

Even though we falter, hesitate, and make excuses, Jesus did not. Before the Father he said, “I will go.” And when the time came to offer his life, he set his face toward Jerusalem and would not be deterred.

This message has three audiences. First, the saints — not in the Roman Catholic sense, but in the biblical sense: all followers of Jesus. To us, this is a sobering call. Comfortable Christianity is not Christianity at all. Jesus demands everything, and that is inherently uncomfortable. Second, the skeptics. If Jesus were merely a moral teacher, his demand for absolute allegiance would make no sense. His claim only holds if he is who he says he is — the Son of God. Third, the church collectively. We must never soft-sell discipleship. Yes, there is beauty, joy, and welcome in following Jesus. But Jesus is clear: discipleship costs. That is the paradox — what feels like loss is really letting go of what we could never keep, in order to grasp what we can never lose: God’s great love and the joy prepared for us. Grace is free, but discipleship costs.

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