Courage as a Christian

by Raymond T. Exum
Crystal Lake Church of Christ, Crystal Lake, Illinois
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I would like to encourage you this morning to look with me at the book of Luke in the New Testament. In Luke chapter 9 our Lord spoke on the subject of courage. It would be interesting to know how much courage we as Christians have when it comes to living the Christian life. I suppose we really cannot know for certain about our courage until the time comes for it to be demonstrated. Yet courage is an important part of the Christian way of life. Courage is even respected out there in the world.

Let me give you an example of the kind of courage that some people are required to have. I want to read from the official Handbook of the United States Peace Corps. I want to read what it says that a Peace Corp volunteer has to do if he is attacked by an anaconda snake. The anaconda is the largest snake in the world. You might think it was the boa constrictor. The anaconda is in the family with the boa constrictor, but it is larger than that. The anaconda snake grows to be 35 feet long and can weigh about 400 pounds. For the volunteers that are assigned to the Amazon Jungle, there is a section in the Peace Corp Handbook on what to do if you are attacked by an anaconda snake. There are 10 steps here that you are supposed to follow:

1. If you are attacked by an anaconda, do not run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight together.
3. Tuck in your chin.
4. The snake will come and begin to nudge and begin to climb over your body.
5. Do not panic. [I love that: Do not panic!]
6. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet in, always from the feet in. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles. Do not panic.
7. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. You must lie perfectly still. This will take a long time.
8. When the snake reaches your knees, slowly and with as little movement as possible, reach down and take our your knife and very gently slide it between the edge of the snake's mouth and your leg. Then suddenly rip upwards severing the snake's head.
9. Be sure to have your knife with you.
10. Be sure your knife is sharp.

Those are the 10 steps on dealing with an anaconda snake in the Amazon jungle.
I think you will see from that reading that there is a lot of courage that would be involved in carrying out those 10 steps. It would be very difficult for most of us to go through something like that. Somebody might say, "That is an awful test of ones courage." I would say to you this morning that that is nothing compared to the courage required to live the Christian way of life. In fact, you may recall what the apostle Peter said on this very subject. Peter said, "Be of sober spirit; be on the alert. Your adversary, the Devil, prowls about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." He doesn't compare Satan to the anaconda but he does compare Satan to a roaring lion who is trying to consume us.

There is great courage therefore that is required in living the Christian way of life. I think maybe there are Christians who do not understand that we are at war with Satan. It is a "winner take all" contest. Some Christians do not understand that we will never be at peaceful coexistence with Satan. It's like a contest with the anaconda snake and the Peace Corp volunteer. There is not going to be peaceful co-existence. There will be a winner who will walk away alive and there will be a loser who will be killed. The question is not can we peacefully coexist with the snake; the question is who is going to be the winner and who's going to be the loser.

In the same way there is great courage that is required to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This is what the Lord is talking about in Luke the 9th chapter. Notice with me, please, verse 51 where Jesus and His followers were in the northern part of Palestine. The Bible says He turned His face toward Jerusalem. Notice please Luke 9:51. "And it came about when the days were approaching for His ascension that He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem."

Talk about courage. The Lord knew what was awaiting Him in Jerusalem. He therefore resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem and began that final journey that would end in His crucifixion there.

Beginning at verse 52 down through verse 56, we see that they passed through Samaria. They were not very welcome there. Beginning in verse 57, as they were getting closer to Jerusalem, three of the followers of Christ approached Him and made some statements to Him along this subject of courage or commitment and what is going to be required. That's what I would like to talk about this morning. Verses 57 through 62 in the 9th chapter of Luke. This is what Luke records on this occasion. "As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' And He said to another, 'Follow Me.' But he said, 'Permit me first to go and bury my father.' But He said to him, 'Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.' And another also said, 'I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.' But Jesus said to him, 'No one after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.' "

Go with me, please, back to verses 57 and 58 when this first follower of Christ approaches Jesus. Basically, these two verses are concerned with putting Christ ahead of
our material possessions and everything that the world out there has to offer. Here is a man that comes to Christ and he says, "I will follow You wherever you go." In the parallel account in Matthew chapter 8, verse 19, we find that this first man was a scribe. Very interesting. Here was a man who was an expert in the old law. It certainly appears from this passage that he was sincere. Therefore he says, "Lord you tell me where to go and I will follow you to that place." Verse 58 is such an odd answer. The Lord replied and said, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Interesting. In other words, Jesus said here is a fox out there in the field, or out in the forest. The fox can hunt all day and when the day is over the fox has a home to go to. He has a home in the ground somewhere and he goes there for the night. There's a bird out there. It can fly all day long and do whatever it wants to and when it gets tired there is a nest that it has to go to.

Notice Jesus Christ said He did not have a hole in the ground or a nest in the tree. He did not have a home to go to. What is the message? The message is that the time may come when we will be called upon to give up our homes for the sake of Jesus Christ. Would we have the courage to give up the house that we live in if it meant being faithful to Jesus Christ? As far as I know, no one here this morning has yet been called upon to move out of his house or turn that house over to somebody else because of persecution. But if we were called upon to do it, would we have the courage to do that?

In fact as we think about all of our material possessions, not just the house, but as we think about everything else that we own, if there is something that comes upon us in the way of persecution, would we give that up for the sake of Jesus Christ? What about those things that interfere with our faith, those things that come between us and Christ. Are we willing to give them up?

I will use an example, and I don't think this applies to anybody here. That's why I'm going to use this example. Suppose we have a swimming pool in the backyard and the kids are addicted to it, as sometimes they will be, and that it is interfering with their coming to church on Sundays or Wednesday nights and so forth. Here is something of a material nature that is damaging our faith or the faith of those in our family. Would we have the courage to order a cement mixer to come and fill the pool up with cement or with dirt or with gravel or with anything else? Would we turn loose of that material possession for the sake of our faith?

Now you can fill in a lot of things there instead of a swimming pool. You might say that there's a boat that's keeping me away from worship and I would say take a saw and cut it in two. Maybe it's sports. Maybe it's baseball or something such as that. You can fill in the blank with anything: a bicycle, a car, clothing, or a cabin in Wisconsin. You fill in the blank. If there is something that is keeping a person from being faithful to the Lord, the Lord is saying you've got to turn loose of it. You've got to have the courage to turn your back on it.
What the Lord is really saying in verse 58 is don't pretend to follow me. If you are not ready to give up what is dear to your heart and follow me, then you are not ready to follow me and you have no right to call yourself a Christian. Beloved, that is pretty strong language. That goes against almost everything we see happening in the denominational world.

Right now, if you look at the denominational world, most churches around us are trying to make it as easy as possible for somebody to be a member there. As easy as possible. The Lord said exactly the opposite of that and what astounds me is He didn't apologize for it. Jesus didn't say, "Well, it really isn't that serious so don't worry about it. You just keep whatever you like and try to be as faithful as you can." He didn't say that. He allowed that statement to stand in verse 58. I think it speaks so much about the urgency of the Christian way of life. We are all crossing the sea of life today. On one shore is the cradle, and on the other shore is the grave. The journey across that sea is going to be very, very short. The Lord is saying to this first follower, this first disciple, don't be misled by everything in the world that glitters and sparkles and all the world has to offer us. Put Christ before those things.

I was recently reading an article in the February of 1996 Smithsonian Institute Magazine. It was a very interesting article about modern western square dancing. This is not the stuff some of us were forced to do in high school in gym class. This is something far, far more complicated than that. It's really very interesting to find out what it takes today to be in this movement, of which there are now about 350,000 followers. It takes 60 hours of training before they let you on the floor. It takes dedicating three nights a week every week of the year to practice this in order to learn the calls. There are 50 basic calls that you learn in the first 60 hours and then there are approximately 3,000 more calls today that are being practiced by those in this movement. It's described in this article as basically like playing the game of chess out on the floor because it is getting so complicated. Yet it continues to grow. In fact this says now they have trained dogs to square dance. That I would like to see. That would be interesting.

These people are obsessed with this subject. They're devoting all of this time, all of three nights a week and the conventions and various performances that they have on weekends and so forth to this effort. I hope it doesn't apply to anyone here, but I would say that what the Lord would tell us is that you can't do both. This is their religion. The article says their social life is limited to their fellow square dancers. This is everything they live for, as far as I can tell, in this article.

What Jesus is saying in these first two verses is that you can't have it both ways. You can't have your hand in the hand of Christ and your other hand in the hand of the world. So this first disciple probably had very good intentions. He says, "I will follow you Lord." The Lord says, "Are you willing to give everything up, including your house? Are you willing to give it up to follow me?"

Notice please the second man who approached Christ in verse 59. Here the Lord said to him, "Follow me." But this man said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father." Again
the Lord gives a very strange answer, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you go and proclaim every word of the kingdom of God." He's saying here that He, that is Jesus Christ, must come before our family, before our loved ones. Here's a man who wanted to go bury his dead.

There is a great deal of speculation of whether this man's dad was dead. Let's assume for a moment that he had passed away. I want to read you something from the sermons of N.B. Hardeman. The Collected Sermons of N.B. Hardeman have been published in five volumes in the Hardeman Tabernacle Sermons. In Vol.4, brother Hardeman, who lived down in Henderson, Tennessee, told of a Christian lady that he knew of in the church there. I thought that what brother Hardeman had to say here was quite interesting. This lady had been a Christian for many years. Her husband died on Saturday and the funeral was to be Sunday afternoon. Sunday morning this woman began to get dressed as if to go to church. Her children and relatives asked what she was going to do. She said, "I'm going to church." "Going to church with your husband just dying?" Her answer was, "Yes. There are plenty of you who would not go to church if he were not dead. I appreciate your sympathy in my presence. I won't be gone long, but my duty is at the house of the Lord." Brother Hardeman said that she went to church.

That would be a direct application of what Jesus is saying here. Let the dead bury the dead; the spiritually dead, that is, bury the spiritually dead. Many people, especially some Greek scholars, have studied this passage and they're a lot smarter than me. They say there is some indication here that he wasn't dead but maybe he was just old. Notice this man was out on the road talking to Jesus. If the guy's father had just died, I don't think he would have been out there talking to Jesus. It's possible that what he was really saying was that I want to stay with my dad until he passes away and then I will come and follow you. If that is the case, then I think that the statement of Jesus is particularly impressive. Let the dead bury the dead. In other words, don't let loved ones or relatives come between us and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do relatives ever come between the Lord and Christians today? Yes they do. Sometimes there is an unbelieving husband, for example, who might plan a weekend trip for his family to a place where there is no church. What is the Christian wife going to do if she knows there is not a church there and she is not going to be able to attend church? I would say that, based on this passage, she has a choice. That choice is between her husband and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What about relatives who show up on Sunday and expect us to feed them and entertain them? I think what the Lord would say is "let the dead feed the dead." In other words let them take care of themselves until church is over. The Lord here is requiring total commitment. What about the relative who says, "I'm flying in. I'll be there at 6:00 p.m. Sunday night. I expect you to pick me up." The Lord would say let the dead pick up the dead. You follow me. Our relatives must be second to the Lord Jesus Christ. If they show up on Wednesday night and want to be fed or whatever, I think what the Lord is saying here is our obligation is to study the Bible with our fellow Christians, is to worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ and when we get through with that then they are
certainly welcome to sit at our table and partake of our food. We cannot allow relatives and loved ones to come between us and the Lord.

We come to verses 61 and 62 and the Lord is saying here that even our social obligations come second to Him. Notice what we find here. We find somebody that wants to follow Christ. He says I will follow you Lord, but first permit me to say goodbye to those at home. Does the Lord have anything against saying goodbye to people? I don't really think so. I think what he was saying here was that knowing that person's family, if you go back there you may very well be persuaded not to follow me anymore. The social pressure, the peer pressure there, is such that you may not come back and be one of mine.

There is tremendous pressure on us today to deny Christ. The reason the world tries to persuade us not to follow Christ is that the world feels very uncomfortable with our faith. When they look at us, they know we believe in right and wrong. If there is a right or wrong, in their mind, that means that what they're doing is wrong. They fidget around us. They are nervous around us. This means that their affairs are sinful. This means that stealing from the company is wrong. It means that cheating on the income tax is wrong. So they are not comfortable around us. Therefore they try to pull us away from the church.

When I was growing up, it was so irritating when school activities were scheduled on Wednesday night because we always went to church on Wednesday night. Today Wednesday night is not even the issue anymore. It's Sunday now. As we think about school activities, we see that Satan has gotten bolder over the years. He intentionally schedules things to try to keep Christians from being faithful to the church. There are work schedules. There are other ways that Satan tries to destroy us. Beloved, it takes more courage to resist what Satan is doing than it does for that Peace Corp volunteer to cut the head off of the snake. I hope that we begin to see the impact of this passage.

It is not child's play to make the good confession and be baptized into the body of Christ. It is not a light claim that we make when we now say that we are Christians. We are to be willing to give up our material goods if called upon to do so; to give up the love of our relatives and the social activities that the world throws at us to try and lead us astray.

I submit this morning that this is one of the most shocking passages that our Lord gave us. Again we see in the religious world today that people ignore this passage. They want to make it as easy as possible to join those churches. They do not understand what the Lord is saying here.

Really the summary of the passage is in verse 62. The Lord ties it all together. He says, "No one who after putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." I will admit that I have never plowed up a field. I've never ridden on a tractor or walked behind a team of horses with a John Deere plow or anything like that. I do have some experiences that may be in some way similar, and one experience is in using a rototiller. You can do a lot of damage with a rototiller if you're not careful. This past summer I was trying to till up our garden and the thing got loose and tore a hole through
the fence around our garden. I know what it's like therefore to have your hands on a 5
horse power engine on the rototiller and not to concentrate on it. If you're not very careful
you can plow through the fence and plow through somebody else's back yard and down
the street, I suppose, if you're not careful. I think that's what He's talking about here. If
you're using something very powerful then you must be looking ahead. You must keep
concentrating.

I can think about riding a bicycle, and a number of us have had this same experience
because we've talked about it in the past. The Illinois Rules of the Road say that you must
ride as far to the right of the pavement as possible. I know that several of us have talked
about the fact that when you turn to look back, the bicycle always steers to the left. I have
tried to avoid it. As far as I'm concerned, it is impossible. To turn around and look back
on the left hand side of the traffic, the bicycle is going to veer to the left and it is a very
dangerous situation.

That's what the Lord's talking about here. Do not look back. If we look back then we're
not worthy to call ourselves Christians. The Lord therefore is saying don't return to the
old way of life. Don't compromise with your material goods, or your relatives, or society.
No compromise. The Lord does not need more superficial disciples. What he's really
saying is that partial surrender to Him is no surrender at all. Again may I point out that
the Lord did not apologize for these statements.

May I leave each one here with a question. What kind of courage do you have as disciple
of the Lord Jesus Christ? May this passage encourage us to be more courageous as we
deal with the temptations of the world day by day.

Someone may desire to become a Christian at this time, and if that's the case we urge you
to think about this very carefully. The Bible says it is worse to obey the Bible and to fall
away than it is not to obey the Gospel in the first place. The Lord requires us to be totally
and completely committed to Him. If you're ready for that decision and are ready to be
baptized into the body of Christ this morning, as we sing the next song would you please
come to the front?