

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: *Unleashed—God’s Words Possess God’s Power*
Service Theme: *Through the Word, Christ Creates Committed Followers*

Sermon Theme: *Total Commitment (June 26, 2022)*
Luke 9:51-63

Imagine you hired a company to renovate your bathroom. But they only work for a few hours once every couple weeks, then disappear. Frustrated with still unfinished bathroom, you confront the boss, who says, “We’ve got a lot of important projects right now. We’ll get to yours when we’ve got time.”

Or imagine your spouse of 20 years admits that they’ve been unfaithful. As you break down in tears, they defend themselves, “What’s the big deal? I’ve been totally committed to you for like 95% of our marriage!”

How would you feel? You’d be furious, right? Because each of those circumstances is an example of the many relationships in life where total commitment is expected, and half-hearted, partial, or occasional commitment is completely unacceptable. But if that goes without saying, then why do we so often convince ourselves that it’s not a problem to be half-hearted, partial, or occasional in our commitment...to God?

Maybe that gets your defenses up. Maybe you’re thinking, “That’s not me! I’m a member of this church. I come to worship and Bible Study most Sundays. I give offerings, and even volunteer in the church whenever I can! I read my Bible and pray with my kids. I’m a totally committed Christian!” Or maybe your head is hanging, because you know full well that you’ve been anything but a totally committed follower of Christ.

If either of those describes you right now, then as we hear what Jesus says in his Word about total commitment, we all need to have humble,

honest hearts about two things: How totally committed you really are to Christ, and how totally committed Christ really is to you!

In today’s sermon text, Jesus addresses 5 men who thought they were totally committed to following him. And in each case, Jesus gives them a wake-up call about how much room they had to grow.

First, it was two of his disciples—the brothers, James and John. As Jesus and the disciples were making their way towards Jerusalem, they were rejected in a Samaritan village. So James and John, who Jesus called the “Sons of Thunder,” lived up to their nickname, asking Jesus, **“*Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?*”** In their eyes, that must have seemed like total commitment. They wanted to make clear that everyone who rejected Jesus, the Son of God, would be punished. Then, everyone would be quick to welcome Jesus, right? And the prophet Elijah had done this before to God’s enemies, so God must be OK with it, right? **“*But Jesus turned and rebuked them.*”**

Then they met a teacher of the law who told Jesus, **“*I will follow you wherever you go.*”** Sounds totally committed, right? But Jesus didn’t high-five him and invite him into the crew. Instead, he told him, **“*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*”**

Next, Jesus invited another man to follow him, but he told Jesus, **“*Lord, first let me go and bury my father.*”** Seems like a reasonable request, right? After all, the Jews placed a great deal of importance on children burying their parents. But Jesus tells him, **“*Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*”**

Finally, another man commits to becoming Jesus follower, with one condition. **“*I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.*”** Again, a seemingly reasonable request. Elisha did that before becoming God’s chosen prophet. But again, Jesus rebukes him, **“*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.*”**

So what is Jesus teaching through his interactions with these men? It might sound like Jesus is saying that totally committed followers can't have anything else in their lives. Sell your home, and give away all your creature comforts. You don't need them anymore. Don't plan on attending any important family events like weddings or funerals. Say goodbye to your family—actually, don't say goodbye—just leave them behind. Do we have to sacrifice everything else in our lives to be totally committed to Christ?

It might sound that way, unless you remember who Jesus is. As the true Son of God, Jesus could see each of these men's hearts. Therefore, he could see the things that would be stumbling blocks to their total commitment to following him! So, Jesus isn't saying we have to abandon every good thing in our lives to follow him. But he is warning us how easily those good things in your life can become the priority of your life—the thing you're committed to most of all, even more than him!

James and John's request might have seemed dedicated to God. But Jesus could see that in their hearts, they valued approval and acceptance most of all, and that they had lost sight of Jesus' mission to ***“seek and to save what was lost.”*** Although the teacher of the law seems committed to following Jesus, Jesus could see that his attachment to his home and his possessions would be a roadblock to becoming Jesus' disciple, who constantly moved from place to place with the Gospel. Although wanting to bury his father seemed like a reasonable request, Jesus could see that the man's attachment to that relationship would hinder his total commitment to Jesus. Many Bible scholars assume that when the man asked to go bury his father, his father wasn't dead yet. Which meant he was telling Jesus, “I'll follow you once my father's dead, whenever that might be.” Although the last man wanted to say goodbye to his parents, just like Elisha did, Elisha's actions showed he was making a complete break from his former life. Jesus could see that this man's family had the priority place in his heart.

Really, total commitment is a First Commandment issue. ***“You shall have no other gods.”*** You might think, “Well I don't worship false gods or bow down to idols!” That might be true. But Martin Luther's explanation of the First Commandment lays it out well. ***“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”***

Jesus could see that things like approval, possessions, and relationships had disordered the love in these men's hearts. And that's what the first commandment is all about-- disordered love! It's not that these things are bad or wrong. They're blessings from God! But if they steal the primary place of fear, love, and trust in our hearts from God, then what is a good blessing becomes spiritually deadly.

So, what do you fear, love, and trust in most of all in your life? If you told Jesus on the side of the road that you would be his committed follower, what flaws in your total commitment would he call out? What disordered love would he see in your heart? What conditions would need to be met before you would follow him? I could list off things that might be idols in your lives for the next 15 minutes, but the fact is, disordered love looks different in everyone's hearts. Therefore, we need to do humble, honest introspection on how total our commitment to Jesus really is.

If you have trouble deciphering what yours are, here are some questions to ask yourself. What would you say gives your life meaning and purpose? What things, if suddenly removed from your life, would make it impossible to have joy? What things fall higher up on your priority list than spending time in God's Word, in God's house, and speaking to God in prayer? Your answers can often help you determine what has become an idol in your life—or at least, what poses that danger. If we're honest and humble, it's evident that our commitment to Christ has been anything but total, right?

On our own, it's impossible to be totally committed to Christ. Because each of us have a sinful nature that is inherently selfish; that is totally committed to prioritizing our own desires and following ourselves instead of Christ. And so we often end up giving God whatever time we have leftover; tossing to him our scraps after all the other more

important things are fed. What would you do with a commitment like that? You'd fire the slow renovators, and leave the unfaithful spouse. So what should God do with half-hearted followers like us?

But that's why with humble, honest hearts we also need to reflect on how totally committed...Jesus really is to you! We see that in the first verse of our sermon text. ***“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”*** What was in Jerusalem? The cross. And Jesus was totally committed, resolute to following the path that led to it. Because the number one love in Jesus' heart...is you. He knew that his final destination was to be taken up again to his heavenly home. And he resolutely set out for Jerusalem, so that by paying for the sins of the world with his death on the cross, and declaring the whole world not guilty of sin through his resurrection, he could bring you home to heaven too! On Jerusalem's cross, Jesus atoned for all the times when our commitment is half-hearted, partial, or occasional.

And every time we're reminded of Jesus' total commitment to us through God's powerful Word, we're increasingly motivated and empowered in our total commitment to him! And as our faith continues to grow through Word and Sacrament, we're more controlled by our spiritual nature, and less controlled by our sinful nature. Less committed to ourselves, and more committed to him! Again, it's with his powerful word that Christ creates committed followers. Not our power, but his!

Sometimes, being totally committed to following Jesus requires us to sacrifice good things from our lives. And that can be really difficult. But the beautiful thing is Jesus then makes every good thing we have to sacrifice exponentially better!

James and John needed to sacrifice their desire for approval and acceptance from everyone. But by following Jesus, they were accepted and approved by God himself, and could look forward to the day of perfect justice when every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. The teacher of the law might have had to sacrifice home and possessions to follow Christ, but following Christ promises an eternal

home in heaven, prepared for us by Jesus himself. Following Christ might have meant the man couldn't bury his father, but following Christ means that we can grieve with certain hope at the funeral of every Christian friend and family member! Following Christ might have required the man to leave behind his family, but following Christ means that we will have an eternal bond with our Christian family, and the whole family of believers, in which we'll never have to say goodbye!

There are plenty of circumstances in our lives where we're willing to make a total commitment in pursuit of a good outcome. Athletes totally committed to training to become a champion. Students totally committed to studying so they can get accepted to their dream school. Musicians totally committed to practicing so they can become first chair. Employees totally committed to working long, hard hours so they'll get promoted. But none of those total commitments comes with guaranteed success of the outcome they're aiming for.

Except our total commitment to following Christ. Success in gaining the outcome we're looking for is guaranteed, because our commitment, as fleeting and half-hearted as it often is, is to the Savior who is totally committed to you.