

Title: *Do What's Best*

Text: Luke 9:57-62

One of the heroes of the modern missionary movement is Billy Borden. If you're not familiar with his story, you need to be. As heir to the Borden Dairy estate, William Borden was already a millionaire when he graduated High School in 1904. In fact, his graduation present from his parents was a trip around the world. As the 16-year-old Borden traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world's hurting people. Finally, Bill Borden wrote home to say, *"I'm going to give my life to prepare for the mission field."* One friend expressed surprise that he was *"throwing himself away as a missionary."* In response, Bill wrote two words in the back of his Bible: "No reserves."

You could say that William Borden had already attained the American Dream. He was poised to enter one of our elite universities and was in a position to live the life of what we call the idle rich. I don't really know what that is. Sleep til noon every day, play golf in the afternoon and go to all the right parties in the evenings in between trips to Rio and the French Riviera. That's got to get boring after a while if you don't have some great purpose for your life.

We are looking for the next several weeks at some of the themes and questions that David Platt raises in his best-selling book *Radical: Taking Your Faith Back from the American Dream*. You may ask, "What's wrong with the American Dream?" How do you even define the American Dream?

There may be a lot of different ways to answer that question. You graduate from high school. Your parents have been able to put aside enough money for you to go to the college of your choice. You graduate and get married. Get a good paying job in the corporate world somewhere. Buy your first home. Join the right clubs. Have 2.3 kids preferably at least one of each. Send your kids to the right schools. Attend church most Sundays if you don't have anything else going on, accumulate enough money so that you can retire one day and spend your days playing golf or traveling.

There's nothing wrong with any of these things in and of themselves. I have a mortgage. Jonathan starts high school this year and that lets us know that he'll be in college before we know it. That's a terrifying thought, not because we're afraid he'll go to college and go crazy. There's that anxiety of how in the world are we going to pay for it? I hope to retire one day. When I'm 82 years old, you will probably want someone with more energy and a fresher perspective to be your pastor. There's nothing wrong with any of these good things in and of themselves but when we look at the call of God upon our lives and needs of the world, we have to ask ourselves, "Are these the best things?"

It doesn't mean that you quit putting money into your retirement plan, necessarily. Maybe you need to look at your plans for retirement differently. If we are going to engage an ever-changing world with the gospel in a relevant fashion, we're going to have to get the best education we can. Owning a home, under most economic conditions is the best long-term

investment you can make.

Jesus is approached by some people though who want to follow him. They see the worth and the value of following him, but yet they haven't really comprehended the whole picture of just what following Jesus will really mean.

In a lot of commentaries and lectionaries, the passage I read this morning is grouped with the passage that comes immediately before it. Verse 51 says, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." That sets the stage and gives us a context for everything that takes place after this. Jerusalem is more than just a geographical destination. It is the place of death and crucifixion. It is the purpose for which Jesus came. It's interesting to read the stories about the temptation of Jesus that we read in the synoptic gospels. Mark in particular leaves the story kind of open-ended. He doesn't give any kind of statement to the effect. Jesus won over the temptation and went on about his business to live happily ever after. I think that's significant. That helps us to appreciate the whole context more fully and to realize that the temptation that was before Jesus for his entire life was the temptation to avoid the cross. He didn't have time for any distractions or half-hearted commitments to him that were based on a whim or on some kind of emotional outburst.

Then the rest of the story reads, "⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them, ⁵⁶ and they went to another village.

There is a contrast set up here between the Samaritans who were unwilling to have anything to do with Jesus and the others who said that they would follow Jesus but they had other things that had to be taken care of first.

As they were walking along the road, there was a man who had seen the entourage and knew enough about Jesus to know that there was some excitement surrounding him. He shouted out, "I will follow you wherever you go." Most of us, taking that statement at face value would say, "Great! Welcome aboard! Glad to have you!" Maybe we have such a low view of the value of following Jesus that we feel like we have to water it down and cheapen it to try to talk someone into following Jesus.

We talk up salvation so much because we're so anxious to get people saved that we don't really give them opportunity to count the cost of following after Jesus. Did this man have any clue what he was really saying when he said, "I'll follow you wherever you go!" It is interesting that in these exchanges, there is a man who is overly exuberant about his desire to follow Jesus and then there are two invitations to people to follow and they come up with excuses or reasons why this isn't a good time for them to follow Jesus.

What is interesting is that as often as not, Jesus seems to come up with reasons for people why they shouldn't follow him. It seems like whenever the crowds start to get too big, he says something to kind of thin the crowd down a little bit. In John 6, the crowds were growing and

people were wanting to learn more about Jesus. It might be a good opportunity to soften the message a little bit. Draw folks in, get them hooked, then lay the hard stuff on them. That wasn't Jesus' approach, though.

He said something that even today we consider strange. John 6:53 says, "Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink."

If I heard that, I don't know how enthusiastic I would be about signing up. A bunch of people decided that it was too much demand for them. A few verses later, John records, " ⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ⁶⁷ "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter knew what the offer really was. I wonder if the man in the crowd really understood what was really involved in being a follower of Jesus. We're not even sure he knew what it meant that Jesus was headed for Jerusalem. There was energy, there was excitement and so often that can draw people in.

When the man said, "I'll follow you anywhere," I wonder if he meant I'll follow you to Jerusalem or back up to Galilee or if he meant I'll follow you to Golgotha and to Gethsemane. It couldn't have very well been Golgotha or Gethsemane because he couldn't have known what those terms even meant. Gethsemane being that place of total surrender to the will of God. Golgotha being that place of crucifixion.

There comes a time when all of the excitement fades and you still have to buck up and be a disciple. The thrill of the mountaintop experience is gone and you find yourself in those moments when you have to act yourself into a new way of feeling rather than feel yourself into a new way of acting. The prospect of the demands that God may be calling you to one of the hard places of the world; to a place which will demand sacrifice which doesn't seem glamorous at all. Some people may be called to have a genuine ministry to movie stars. I saw an article the other day asking why more movie stars don't get saved and make professions of faith. Some may get called to minister to the surfing community in Hawaii. Others are called to the slums of Calcutta, to an AIDS orphanage in Mozambique, or shanty-town in Haiti. If you're just running on adrenaline or some sort of emotional thrill, you won't make it. If you are doing it out of a deep desire to serve Jesus Christ and minister to his people, you can actually get excited about going to minister to the poorest of the poor. You can have those experiences where you meet Jesus and you encounter God through a raggedy kid or through an AIDS patient or through someone whose life will be characterized by grinding poverty, but you made a difference for them.

Jesus told the man who cried out, "I'll follow you anywhere!" Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of God has nowhere to lay his head. We like to have the beauty queens and the star athletes give their testimonies when we have evangelistic rallies as if to say, this

could be you if you give your life to Jesus. It's as if their star-power gives the gospel extra credibility. It also gives an indication that the gospel is for the rich and the good looking and the athletic, more than it is for anybody else. The truth is God is just as likely to work through the average and the unattractive.

One of the threads that ties these three episodes together is choosing the best over merely the good. The point is what does a life of radical discipleship really look like? This man thought that if he could just be with Jesus, there would be this constant buzz, this constant thrill. In following after Jesus, there are moments of great exhilaration but there are also moments of enduring trial and difficulty and gritting your teeth and getting through some things that you just have to get through with God's help. It's interesting to be at seminary. Some people have the idea a.) that seminary classes are just going to be advanced Sunday School and b) that because I'm in a Christian environment studying Christian things preparing for Christian ministry, I'm going to be on a perpetual spiritual high.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, this German theologian who was part of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany who eventually was martyred in Flossenburg Prison wrote, "When Jesus Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." It may or may not involve physical martyrdom. It certainly will involve dying to my own plans, my own ambitions, my own dreams so that I may allow his plans and his dreams and his ambitions to be accomplished in me. British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge said, "I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die. For these two discoveries I am beholden to Jesus."

It is better to choose a life lived for Jesus Christ that doesn't guarantee that it's going to be a road of ease, it's also better to choose Jesus Christ over anything else that may be a good thing. The first man said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." The second man was called by Jesus, "Come. Follow me." It's interesting that when James and John, Peter and Andrew were called, they immediately left their nets and followed him. This man said, "First let me go bury my father." My Dad died on a Monday morning, The funeral was on Friday, I spent most of that week with my family at my mother's house and my deacons told me not to worry about having to preach on Sunday, they'd take care of it, which they did. Were my deacons being nicer than Jesus? Should they have said, "What's more important your dead father or preaching the gospel?" It would be unheard of for anyone to be that callous. Why would Jesus then say, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

There are a lot of plausible explanations for that. The most obvious is that his father isn't dead yet. The man is saying, "When my dad dies and I no longer have any relationship with him, I'll come follow you." You can analyze this to death, but the basic point is that Jesus is saying loyalty to me takes place over even the best of obligations or relationships. There's nothing wrong with family. Family is great, but there's an obligation and a loyalty that goes even above our relationship or our loyalty or own family. Will we be willing to put the best above the good? Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and

children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple.” That just means, “Choose me over them.”

Then in the next episode, Jesus says, “Come follow me” and the person says, First let me go back and say good-bye to my family. When Elisha decided to follow Elijah he made the same request. But look what Elisha did, though. “²⁰ Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.” “Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”²¹ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

To paraphrase one commentator. It wouldn't have been radical if Jesus had told us to choose him over the devil. This commentator goes on to say, “He told us to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from the possession and worship of family and have found the distance necessary to love them.”

Upon graduation from Yale, William Borden turned down some high-paying job offers. In his Bible, he wrote two more words: "No retreats." William Borden went on to do graduate work at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey. When he finished his studies at Princeton, he sailed for China. Because he was hoping to work with Muslims, he stopped first in Egypt to study Arabic. While there, he contracted spinal meningitis. Within a month, 25-year-old William Borden was dead.

When the news of William Whiting Borden's death was cabled back to the U.S., the story was carried by nearly every American newspaper. "A wave of sorrow went round the world . . . Borden not only gave (away) his wealth, but himself, in a way so joyous and natural that it (seemed) a privilege rather than a sacrifice " wrote Mary Taylor in her introduction to his biography. Was Borden's untimely death a waste? Not in God's perspective. Prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in his Bible. Underneath the words "No reserves" and "No retreats," he had written: "No regrets."

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