

“FIRST...”

When hesitation hides an excuse

In Luke 9, Jesus encounters several people who say they want to follow Him.

To one of them, Jesus simply says, *“Follow me.”*

The man responds, *“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”*

Another man says, *“I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”*

There’s one word I keep noticing in both responses: **first**.

Neither man rejects Jesus. Neither says he doesn’t want to follow Him. And neither of the things they want to do sounds wrong. Caring for family and saying goodbye to people you love sound pretty responsible. If someone told us they needed to take care of either of those things before leaving on a journey, most of us would probably understand.

The tension is in what comes first. Jesus says, *“Follow me,”* and both men have something they believe needs to happen before they can.

A few chapters later, Luke tells us about another man who comes to Jesus. He is wealthy and influential, and Matthew tells us he is young. We’ve come to know him as the rich young ruler.

The man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus points him toward the commandments, and the man responds, *“All these I have kept since I was a boy.”*

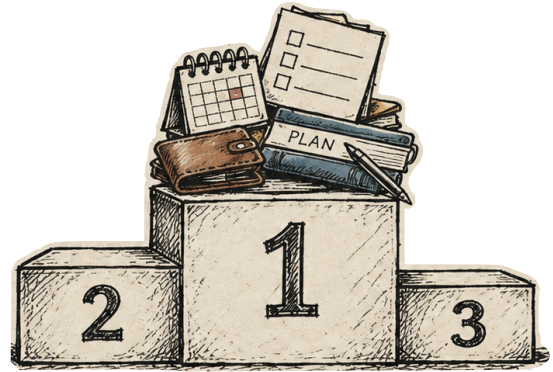
I’ve always found that response interesting. He is confident that he has been obedient. This isn’t someone who appears indifferent toward God. He comes looking for Jesus. He asks a spiritual question. He knows the commandments. As far as he can see, he has done what God has asked of him.

Then Jesus says something that must have caught him off guard: *“You still lack one thing.”*

That’s an interesting thing to say to a man who seems to have so much, especially one who is confident he has been obedient.

Jesus continues: *“Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

Jesus isn’t simply asking him to give something up. He is offering him something greater: treasure in heaven and a life following Jesus. But to move toward what Jesus is offering, he has to loosen his grip on what he already has.



And he can't do it.

Luke tells us that when the man heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. He never says the word "*first*," but his response reveals that something has taken first place. His wealth isn't simply something he owns. When Jesus asks him to release it and follow, he cannot.

That makes his claim about keeping the commandments even more interesting. He believes he has been obedient, but Jesus' invitation exposes something his understanding of obedience has missed.

Jesus doesn't argue with him about his spiritual record or start reviewing every commandment. He simply invites him to follow, and the invitation uncovers something the man couldn't see.

This is where this story gets uncomfortable for those of us who have followed Jesus for a long time. We have a history with Him. We can point to decisions we have made, sacrifices we have made, places we have gone, things we have built, people we have served, and fruit we have seen.

Those things matter. We should celebrate faithfulness and remember what God has done. **But yesterday's obedience doesn't automatically answer today's invitation.**

There is a subtle danger in having a history of following Jesus. We can begin to use what we have already done as evidence that Jesus still has first place now. We can become so familiar with the ways He has led us before that we assume we already know what following Him will look like next.

Then He asks us to move differently.

He puts someone in front of us we didn't expect. He opens a door we hadn't considered. He challenges an assumption we have carried for years. He draws our attention toward a place we have overlooked. He asks us to release something that was once incredibly fruitful. He stirs something in us that doesn't fit neatly into the plans we already made.

That's when what comes **first** starts to become visible.

I'll follow, but FIRST I need to understand where this is going.

I'll take the step, but FIRST I need more resources.

I'll try something different, but FIRST I need to know it will work.

I'll go, but FIRST I need everyone else to understand.

I'll move, but FIRST I need to know what happens after I do.

Those aren't ridiculous concerns. Some of them are completely reasonable. Preparation can be wise. Asking questions can be wise. Waiting can be wise. Seeking counsel can be wise. Jesus Himself talked about counting the cost. Scripture never asks us to confuse recklessness with faith.

But even good things can move into first place.

Clarity can come first. Security, approval, having enough resources can come first. Protecting something that has been fruitful can come first. We can even want enough information that trust is no longer necessary.

We want Jesus to show us where the road goes, how everything will work, where the resources will come from, how people will respond, and what the outcome will be. Once all of that has been settled, we will happily follow.

But by then, what came first?

We see this tension throughout Scripture.

Abraham is told to go without being given the entire map.

Peter has to step out of the boat before he knows what walking on water feels like.

The disciples leave their nets without receiving a detailed explanation of what the next three years will involve.

Again and again, people have to move without having enough information to control what happens next.

Movement has a way of revealing what has first place.

That is what happened with the rich young ruler. As long as the conversation remained about commandments he had already kept, he felt confident. When Jesus brought the conversation into the present and invited him to follow, something hidden became visible.

There is one detail in Mark's telling of the story that changes the way I read the whole encounter. Before Jesus tells the man to sell what he has, Mark says, "*Jesus looked at him and loved him.*"

I love that. Jesus isn't trying to expose him so He can embarrass him. He isn't looking for an opportunity to prove the man wrong or dismiss everything that came before. He loves him enough to uncover something the man cannot see, and then He invites him to follow.

Jesus still does that.

His invitations have a way of revealing our priorities. They uncover the things we trust for security, the things we are afraid to lose, the assumptions we have never thought to question, and even good things that have quietly moved into a place they were never meant to occupy.

Which brings me back to something else Jesus said: "*Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.*"

There's that word again.

First.

Jesus isn't asking us to stop caring about family, planning wisely, stewarding resources, remembering what He has done, or valuing things that have been fruitful. He is putting those things in their proper place.

The Kingdom comes first.

And following Jesus has a way of uncovering whether it actually does.

That is one reason I have learned to pay attention when I feel resistance to a step in front of me. Not every hesitation means Jesus is telling me to move. Sometimes waiting is exactly what obedience looks like.

Discernment matters.

But resistance is worth exploring.

Why do I need that before I can move?

Why do I need to know that before I can say yes?

Why does this particular thing feel impossible to release?

Why have I decided this condition needs to be met first?

Those questions can uncover a lot. Sometimes we don't know what has first place until Jesus asks us to move.

And when He does, pay attention to whatever you find yourself putting before the invitation.

It could reveal what is really ***first***.