

## **CALVARY ROAD WORDS**

**Luke 9:46–62**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

“An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.’ ‘Master,’ said John, ‘we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.’ ‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said, ‘for whoever is not against you is for you.’ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?’ But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’ He said to another man, ‘Follow me.’ But the man replied, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.’ Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:46–62, NIV).

I’ve called this message today “Calvary Road Words.” It is the beginning of the Calvary road. It starts in Galilee, goes through Samaria and ultimately, winds up in Jerusalem. It is a time when

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Jesus is setting His face to go to Jerusalem. In fact, verse 51 explicitly says, “When the time was come that he should be received up, [Jesus] steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem” (KJV).

He took His face and pointed it. He’d already begun to talk about His death earlier in Luke 9:21–22. Right after Peter confessed Him as Lord, He announced for the first time His approaching death. Then on the Mount of Transfiguration, He talks with Moses and Elijah about His exodus, his death, which He will accomplish in Jerusalem. Then when He comes down from the Mount, verses 44–45, He—for the second time—explicitly talks to His disciples about His death. Now He is beginning on the road.

Jesus actually could have gone elsewhere than south. On the Mount of Transfiguration, when His nature was changed and His divine nature shown through, He could have gone straight up. He could have been translated like Elijah of old. Or He could have headed east and gone to Damascus. He could have gone north to Phoenicia and gotten away from all the crush of going to Jerusalem. He could have gone west to some remote island of the sea and lived out His years. But for us, He chose to set His face to go to Jerusalem.

It’s a very somber time now in the gospel. In fact, Luke carries this all the way through chapter 19, in this journey to Jerusalem. As Jesus is going to Jerusalem, there are many things that He wants to share with His disciples, some of which He is prevented immediately from sharing, because there are other concerns that are coming up. He is concerned about tremendous things and they’re concerned about some peripheral matters.

By the way, it should be noted that it is not always easy to do the will of God. In setting His face to go to Jerusalem, Jesus was doing the most difficult thing possible. The easier thing would have been to go up or out; but not to go down, to head south. I found it many times to be the case in our own life, that the will of God which involves an easy yoke, a yoke that fits well,

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nevertheless, has its difficult moments when we must choose between the easy way, which is not God's way, and the more difficult path. On the Calvary road, at the beginning of it, Jesus gives the disciples three critical lessons: one on humility, one on tolerance, and one on discipleship.

#### **I. Let's first look at the lesson He gives on humility.**

It is occasioned, in verses 46–48, by an argument among His disciples about who the greatest is. It's evident from reading the biblical text that this is not a conversation which occurred once. But this matter of who is the greatest was something that they were continually talking about. The argument had been going on for some time. It's easy for us to see what had occasioned it. The inner three disciples—Peter, James and John—had been with Jesus when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead and they'd been with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration. On both occasions, Jesus told them not to tell people what had happened. They come down, and there's a smile on their face. We noted this last week. The other nine say, "What happened?" And they say, "We can't tell you, but we just had a wonderful experience. Too bad you missed out. Sorry that you were trying to cast out the demon. So sorry that you're not spiritual enough to have been successful. If you'd been spiritual, you'd have been with us up on the mountain. But Jesus knows the Grade A disciples from the Grade B disciples and it's very clear what Grade you're in." Who is the greatest? And also among the three there's this contest. Later we read that James and John's mother comes and makes the request that they be given the left and right-hand seats. Who's going to have the power when Jesus comes in His kingdom? At least give them credit for having some faith that He's going to have a kingdom, in which they're going to have some power.

One of the fundamental problems we have in human relationships today is this same question: Who's the greatest? Who's number one? Who calls the shots? For those of you who are in

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nuclear families, is that a question in your home? Who calls the shots? Who wants to call the shots? Everybody wants to call the shots! The kids want to call the shots. The parents want to call the shots. The wife wants to call the shots and the husband wants to. Power. We've had a teaching among Christians that's said, "If you're the husband, you give the orders in the home. That's what it means to be the head of the house," which is a misunderstanding, guys, of the concept of headship. It's not who has the power but who has the love. Unfortunately, or fortunately, the one who is the head of the home is most responsible for demonstrating servanthood. And for demonstrating humility and practicing love.

Power control. Who's going to have the power? It's sometimes a problem in the body of Christ, in the church. It happens in small groups. It happens in big groups. It can absolutely destroy a cell in the body or it can destroy a ministry or can destroy a whole church. Who has the power? At the church at Philippi, there were two leading ladies in the church that were at odds with one another: Euodia and Syntyche. Paul has to say to them that he beseeches them to agree in the Lord. Some people think that the letter of Philippians, the whole of it, was written to resolve their disagreements, because earlier in the letter Paul says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-9). So he's talking about humility throughout the letter and about the need of subordinating at times our own strong interests, for the welfare of the whole—being a servant.

Diotrephes, in 3 John, had this problem. He liked to put himself first.

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We must, if we're looking to effectively serve the Lord, not look for a place to shine but look for a place to serve. We should be far more concerned about what service we can give than what gifts we have. I find, periodically, people have an interest, "What are my spiritual gifts?" That's good. I'm glad to see that in our day we place emphasis on the giftedness, on the whole body of Christ, and that all of us are given various ministries by the Holy Spirit; that the ministry doesn't just belong to whoever stands behind the pulpit but we're all ministers. And the gifts of the Holy Spirit are distributed throughout the body and, well, we ought to know what our gifts are. But a more critical question than "What are my gifts?" is "Where can I serve?" If you will ask yourself, "Where can I serve?" and begin to serve, you will never have to worry about where your gifts are. Because gifts are deployed when we serve.

The disciples are forgetting the emphasis on service and putting the emphasis on greatness and privilege, so Jesus role-models with a child and puts a child in their midst and says, "Be like this little child." I'd imagine it was a little child of two or three. You can take a child who is maybe from a very wealthy family and another child who's from a very poor family, one child of position and privilege and another maybe not having any of those things. But little children are not that concerned about their last name. They're not running around as a two- or three-year-old saying, "I'm the son of so and so!" They can just establish a relationship with one another without getting hung up on all these stereotypes that we have in this pecking order that we put on people. So Jesus says, "Be like a child. Have this relationship of unfeigned honesty, even naiveté, in your human relationships with one another. Don't put this deal on one another of position and privilege. The least will be the greatest. The one who takes the place of service will find himself or herself most fulfilled."

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The great devotional writer F.B. Meyer said, “I used to think that God’s gifts were on shelves, one above another. The taller we grew, the easier we could reach them. I find now that God’s gifts are on shelves, one beneath another, and the lower we stoop, the more we get.”

I ran across a little story this week. This person was noticing that big birds don’t sing. I had never noticed that before. Have you ever heard an eagle sing or a vulture sing? Or an ostrich? Big birds don’t sing. Crows don’t sing. It’s the little birds that sing. The little canary, the little wren, the little lark, the little robin. This person was saying this is true in the Christian life as well. Big birds don’t sing. It’s the little birds, because the sweetest music comes from those Christians who are small in their own estimation before the Lord. People who are trying to keep up a real big front of carrying the power find that, when they do that, they dissipate the honest and authentic joy that can come with the Christian life. The little birds sing best.

### **II. Another lesson that the Lord wants the disciples to learn is tolerance.**

Verses 49–56. There are two particular instances that draw that out. One is that John is sitting, listening to the Lord while he puts a child in their midst and talks about receiving a child, receiving Me and receiving Him who sent Me. It dawns on him there is a person he didn’t receive well the other day. Did he do the wrong thing? His conscience begins to trouble him, “Master, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.” There’s some real humor in that. If you’re following the story in Luke 9, you remember that, just a few verses before that, the disciples had tried to valiantly cast a demon out and hadn’t been able to. Now, here’s a guy, not even with their company, using the name of Jesus, casting out demons, and they tell him, “Stop. We can’t do it and we sure don’t want you to. Don’t do it,” they said. Jesus said, “Whoever is not against you is for you.”

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Then the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, starting to go through Samaria. The Samaritan village quite naturally is inhospitable to Jesus, like they were inhospitable to all Jewish pilgrims, because they had their own temple. Modern day Nablus, biblical Shechem or Sychar on Mount Gerizim. Why be hospitable to people going to the wrong place? So James and John wanted to have Jesus send fire down and give them a good jolt. Burn them up! Jesus has to rebuke them on both counts for their intolerance.

I really liked what happened in the Billy Graham crusade. I hadn't thought of it in the terms that Billy Graham had. But in his crusade, a lot of the evenings, he took moments to commend the entertainers that had put on the Live Aid concert which raised so much money for famine relief. He said, "So many of us as Christians rightly find things wrong in contemporary music, but let's give credit for when something right is done. And it's right to help out in the tremendous human need of the world today, which is a famine need."

I think, from time to time, we need to recognize that it's all right, that Jesus endorses us linking arms—and hands and hearts—with those who are fighting a common enemy. It may be famine. It may be abortion. Not everybody working against the abortion cause is a Christian, but we can link up in the cause of justice and righteousness with those who are not believers. We can link up against apartheid, against poverty.

I like the little story that was told of a small brewery town where the president of the brewery decided that it was time he gave some money to the church. So he wrote out a check for ten thousand dollars and gave it to a pastor of a church. The pastor disdainfully refused it on the grounds that he wasn't going to receive tainted money. So the president of the brewery went to another pastor and gave him check for ten thousand dollars. This pastor said, "This money has served the devil long enough. It's about time it served the Lord." Linking up for good.

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In the case of the exorcist, this man had been using Jesus' name. The people who did the Live Aid Concert were not raising that money in Jesus' name. But here was a man who was doing something in Jesus' name. So Jesus says, "Whoever is not against you is for you." The Lord is capable of paradoxical statements. He will turn around a few days later, we find in Luke 11:23, and say something that's the exact reverse. "He who is not with Me is against Me." On the one hand, He says, "Whoever is not against you is for you," and then He says, "He who is not with Me is against Me." What He means, I think, can be determined by how we apply it. If we should use the first—whoever is not against you is for you—as a text by which to judge others: if they're not actively against the Lord, then we're not involved in trying to launch direction against them. That's why this group from Maryland that was distributing leaflets at the Billy Graham rally, warning everybody of what a heretic he was, was illustrating the point that Jesus was making here. If Billy Graham's not against me, then he must be for me. That's the conclusion they should have reached. But if we're judging ourselves, then Luke 11:23 comes into focus: if you're not with Me, you're against Me. We need to say of our own life, "Lord, it's important in regard to You, personally, that I don't just have a passive kind of a stance. I must be for You or I will be against You."

In refusing to burn out the Samaritans, Jesus is repudiating force as a means of entering a relationship to Him. If the church throughout its history, the institutional church, would only learn what Jesus was saying here. That you don't coerce people to be hospitable. That you don't coerce people to convert. Christianity is not Christianity when it forces people to become Christians. The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus. He is a gentleman. He stands at the door. He doesn't bash it in.

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Jesus wants us to keep that in mind in regard to our relationships, that we not force or manipulate our way into getting our will, but act as gentlemen and gentlewomen, leaving it up to the Lord.

Abraham Lincoln was criticized for being too courteous to his enemies. When he was reminded that it was his duty to destroy his enemies, he gave this answer, “I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.”

### **III. The third lesson that Jesus gives on the road to Calvary is the cost of discipleship.**

There are three would-be disciples in this particular section of verses 57–62. We call them would-be disciples because we really don't know if they became disciples or not. Sometimes we think maybe they didn't but we don't know that. We just assume it and we have no basis for assuming that they walked away. Maybe, indeed, when Jesus laid down the terms of discipleship, each of them said, “That's fine! I will follow You. I won't delay.” But there are three would-be disciples.

It's interesting to look at how the three come to Jesus. The first and the third one come on their own accord. They are, in effect, volunteers. They say to Him, “Lord, I will follow You.” The second one is called. Jesus says, “Follow Me.”

In the Gospels, when Jesus was calling disciples to Himself, He was taking the initiative. Every disciple, up to this point, had been called by the Lord. “Come, follow me...and I will make you fishers of men.” To Levi, “Follow Me.” Leave your tax collecting office. But here, now, is a disciple who says, “I want to follow You,” and the Lord doesn't say to him, “No. No volunteers allowed. I'm the one who calls and if you aren't called by Me, you can't come.” There are some people who are in the vein, theologically, who sit down and say, “If God's going to elect you, you're going to be elected, but forget about it if he hasn't called you.” Here are two that come on their own.

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That's one way to be called of the Lord. To be a volunteer.

I asked Morris Williams, several years ago when he ministered in our church, how it was that he came to have his missionary call. He is today the director of the Assemblies of God's field of the continent of Africa. He has several hundred missionary families that report to him. He himself served, several decades, as a very effective missionary, as a real man of God. I said to him, "Brother Williams, I'm interested in how you came to your call. I was raised in an atmosphere where you didn't become a missionary until you got the call. It was a voice or vision or something that said, 'Go to Africa,' and you went if you had that. If you didn't have that, you stayed home. How did you get your call?" He said, "I never had a call." I thought, how can the Field Director of Foreign Missions to Africa say he didn't have a call? He went on to explain it. He said, "I saw a need and I came to understand, from the Gospels, that Jesus accepted volunteers. So I volunteered and He let me volunteer."

I say to the many young people that are in this audience, have you thought about volunteering for Jesus? Maybe as a young person, you're sitting around waiting for God to speak to you in a kind of mysterious way. But don't wait for that. He's perfectly capable and has called people that way. But don't wait for that. Instead, volunteer to go wherever the Lord would have you to go. Give Him first choice in your life.

Jesus is on the way to the cross and He is only asking of others what He is doing Himself. To the first disciple, the lesson is, there is no guarantee of earthly security. I wonder if we really recognize the power of what Jesus has to say to us. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). Jesus is saying that, even the fowl and the animals have regular places in which they inhabit. But I'm on the way to the cross. I have no regular place.

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What Jesus is not only asking the disciples then, but he is asking all of us, is that we always hold material things so loosely that they never come between us and doing His will. I want everything I own, I want my IRA, whatever size it is; my checking account, whatever size it is; my house and my apartment and my things or whatever is precious to me—it may be a Datsun 280Z—I want that all to be loose, so that there is never regret if we walk away from something that is material to obey some spiritual mission that the Lord is laying upon my life. I think that’s what we translate what Jesus is saying in our own life.

I was really impressed this week in reading about Billy Graham’s wife, Ruth Bell. She, as a young person, laid everything on the altar, gave everything to God in giving Him permission to use her life. She was a missionary’s daughter to China. She spent her early years in China. When she was a teenage girl, she felt she had a call to be a missionary to Tibet. She decided that that’s how she would give her life to the Lord. She would serve out her years on earth as a single missionary to Tibet. As she got ready, however, as a teenager, to go to Korea, to a boarding school (missionary kids often go to boarding schools), she was writing in her journal. She recounts this in a book called *A Time for Remembering*. She was recounting in her journal the struggle in her teenage soul over letting the Lord have preeminence in her life. She said, “Maybe the Lord won’t want me to go to China or to Tibet as a single missionary. He may want me to marry someone. If He does, what’s important? What kind of a person would He want me to marry?” She sets down a deliverance ministry and makes out this list. She hadn’t yet met Billy Graham. “If I marry, he must be so tall that when he is on his knees, as one has said, he reaches all the way to heaven. His shoulders must be broad enough to bare the burden of a family. His lips must be strong enough to smile, firm enough to say no, and tender enough to kiss. Love must be so deep that it takes its stand in Christ and so wide that it takes the whole lost world in. He

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must be active enough to save souls. He must be big enough to be gentle and great enough to be thoughtful. His arms must be strong enough to carry a little child.” She was giving her life to the Lord. Saying, “Lord, if Your highest will for me is not to be a single missionary to Tibet, then I want to marry in your will.” Her idea of a husband was, first of all, someone who, when he got on his knees, would be tall enough to reach to God. That was her first concern—spiritual priorities. Does God answer prayer? Does He take those commitments that we make and treat them seriously? You better believe He does!

So to this disciple, Jesus is saying, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Follow Me. There’s no guarantee of earthly security, but follow Me. I’ll be your security. I’ll lead you.

He’s saying to the second disciple that there’s no time for delay. The disciple says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (verse 59). We’re left without understanding all that word meant within its own culture. Some think that the man’s father was indeed dead and if he were dead, in the Near Eastern world, burial occurred on the same day or within one day. This would seem to be awfully rough of Jesus to say, “No, you can’t go home and bury your father.”

When my father passed away, it would have been unthinkable for me to be doing something else on the day of his memorial service. But if this is what Jesus meant, what He’s doing is contrasting a loyalty to Him above anything that the religion of the day taught. Jewish law said burial was a more important duty than circumcision. If your son was being circumcised, and on that day, instead, you had the burial of a family member, you were to go to the burial and put off the circumcision. If you were killing the Passover sacrifice, you were to go to the burial and not do the sacrifice. If you were reading the Law, you were to go to the burial and not read the Law.

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If it were doing temple service as a priest, you were to lay that aside and go take care of the burial.

Jesus is saying, “There’s one thing that’s more important than a burial, and that’s following Me. Are you ready to do that?” That may be what He was saying to him. Am I number one? More probably, what He was doing was kind of a Near Eastern proverb. Interestingly enough, George Smith, a traveler of the Holy Land—about fifty years ago—records a time when he was in the Holy Land and he came upon a young Arab man and asked him what he was going to do with his life. He said, “I haven’t determined yet. I first must bury my father.” And later, in the day when George Smith was in this man’s home, he discovered that his father was in his forties and very much alive. It turned out that “bury my father” was an Arab proverb meaning, “I will take care of my parents until they pass away.” Sort of the importance of a really tight family structure we know in many cultures. This may be what this man is saying.

Jesus is saying, “I’m on the way to the cross. There’s not time for you to do that. I’ll be gone. My mission on earth will be incomplete if you delay. You must come and follow Me.”

Likewise, he says to the third would-be disciple. “There’s no time to reconsider.” This man wants to go home and say good-bye to his family. It seems like a reasonable request, but good-byes aren’t that easy. Good-byes involve the parents throwing a party and inviting all the relatives and the aunts and the uncles and the cousins and the friends, the whole village. Having a feast for several days. In the midst of all that, a person has to have second thoughts of, “Was I really doing the right thing when I said I’d follow Jesus? All my family’s here. The security looks a whole lot better.” What Jesus is saying is that, if you’re going to follow Me, don’t reconsider your decision.

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How many of us, when we made a decision for Christ, immediately after that decision were confronted with reconsideration. Maybe a day later, maybe an hour later, maybe a week later. Maybe you walked forward in the Billy Graham crusade and two days later said, “What in the world did I do? Did I give way to my emotions? What happened there?” We start reconsidering. Jesus is saying, “Don’t reconsider. If you decide to follow Me, go ahead and follow Me.”

When we follow Him, we find out that His path indeed leads to glory. Jesus is saying that, if we will be His disciple and be a person who leans on Him as his security, a person who does not delay discipleship, a person who takes no time to reconsider, then in doing that, we become like Him on His way to Calvary. We become conformed to His image. Because the main goal of Jesus is for us to have His personality. Not only give us His life, but let us have His personality as well. “Stamp thine own image deep on my heart.” Lord, let me have Your Calvary road attitudes and mentality.

In a few hours, I’ll be in San Antonio, Texas. Of course, the main feature in San Antonio is the Alamo. I plan to see it this week. There is, on a wall near the main entrance of the Alamo, a portrait. The portrait has the name of a person and an inscription: James Butler Bonham. The inscription says this, “James Butler Bonham, no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It was placed here by the family, that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom.”

Jesus left no physical portrait. We’re grateful He didn’t or it would have been sold by now! He left no physical portrait. We are the portrait that people have to look at. It’s being made into His image, having His likeness that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom. “Lord, stamp thine own image deep in my heart.”

### **Closing Prayer**

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Father, we thank You for these moments we've had to consider Your Word in our life. For some, Lord, the teaching that You give on being a child and not being concerned with power and authority has come as a welcome word in our life today, because that's where we're struggling with issues that relate to control and dominance and whose word is going to be listened to the most. You simply point out to us the way of a child. Also, Lord, You point us to the way of a servant. That, like You, we can lay some things aside. That maybe, rather than being in control right now, we should just be satisfied to extend the love of a caring person. So, Lord, help us to be loving if we cannot be powerful. Help us, Lord, to be tolerant. It's often hardest to be tolerant with people who are closest to us, within our network of friends and family. Help us, Lord, to have Your kind of forgiveness and peace. And help us, Lord, to be Your disciples, to put everything on the altar for You. To make no plans except Your plans. To make no decisions unless they are Your decisions. To not put our hand on the plow and look back, for if we look back, having begun, then we begin plowing in a crooked line. Instead, Lord, help us keep our eyes straight ahead on You, so that what we're doing in life may leave a straight record, a clear reading, a helpful ministry. Our discipleship, Lord, is not done until we stand forever in Your presence as worshipers. Our discipleship has no vacation time. It has no weekends off. It has no breaks. It's meant to go on. Help us to be Your disciples. Give us the strength, in our emotions, in our mind and in our will, to serve You with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.