

**Title: *A Realistic Look at Discipleship***

**Subtitle:** Realism versus idealism in the Christian Life

**Video URL:** [https://youtu.be/Ec9\\_PSR0Pms](https://youtu.be/Ec9_PSR0Pms)

Our Gospel lesson for today comes from the beginning of what scholars call Luke's Travel Narrative. It is the story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, a movement from the north to the south. It is a journey from the life he knew in Galilee, where crowds thronged to see him, to the death he will experience in Jerusalem. Luke begins this narrative with these words, "*When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*"<sup>1</sup>

It appears that all the characters we meet in today's readings – apart from Jesus – are distracted by something. The disciples of Jesus are distracted by their mistrust of the Samaritans. The people that came up to Jesus on the way were distracted by their material possessions, family responsibilities, and social conventions. The Galatians are distracted by all manner of religious practices which are not central to the Gospel. Even Elijah, if you look at the context, was distracted and discouraged by unrealistic expectations.

In his book "Faith Beyond Resentment," the Roman Catholic theologian James Alison calls Elijah's dark night of the soul his "un-deceiving." But he is not the only one in the Biblical accounts before us who needed their outlook on life corrected.

Dorothy Sayers, a renowned British author and Christian philosopher, once wrote, "It seems to me that it is pretty disastrous, that the idea should have gotten about that

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:51

Christianity is an unworldly, unreal, idealistic type of religion. On the contrary, it is fiercely and even harshly realistic. If you understand the nature of the kingdom that it is partially here but not here, you will not be an idealist.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a realist will be much less naïve about things when life doesn't go his way.

So to follow Christ means you have to understand how difficult the journey ahead really is. When Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, he knew full well what was before Him. The betrayal, the unjust trial, the mockery, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the spitting, the nails, the spear, the agony on the cross, yet he continues going forward. And why, because he was motivated by love.

Luke's Gospel tells us as they journeyed on their way, ***“they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them.”***<sup>3</sup>

As we enter into this story and try to apply it on the ground of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century context, it shows just how far the disciples needed to change how they thought about people who opposed them. When conflict and disagreements arose as they tried to prepare the way of the Lord, opposition was inevitable. And when they wanted to call down hellfire on those who opposed them, Jesus taught them a different approach. Learning to love their enemies was not easy for them, and neither is it easy for us. Learning to bless those who curse you means that we need not

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<sup>2</sup> From Goodreads.com/quotes (some portions paraphrased)

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:52-55

run from darkness but instead inhabit a spirit of compassion that is ready to announce the year of the Lord's favor in it, both in word and deed, as we seek to bring restoration and renewal. In other words, they were to be for the kingdom of God rather than merely stating the things they protested. It's hard to minister to someone if they feel you are against them. If the world feels adversarial to you, you will tend to avoid it, judge it, and lack empathy for the people living in darkness. The world is a place that needs the light of God's love. It's a place where we need to engage people wholeheartedly, even when we adamantly disagree. Simply being against something is easy. But being for something takes actively getting involved. Rather than fighting darkness, we need to bring light. St. Francis would call us to pray, that we would be instruments of his peace so that where there is injury, pardon, where there is doubt, faith. But for God to answer that prayer, we must be engaged.

In fact, I chose Esther as an Old Testament book for our consideration during our Coffee and Contemplation time because it gives a human picture of a similar engagement.

As the disciples were pondering these things, a would-be disciple came up to Jesus and said, "*I will follow you wherever you go.*"<sup>4</sup> But Jesus didn't want him to suppose that life in his service would be all pleasure and smooth sailing. There is a cross to carry, a battle to be fought, and a race to be run. That battle, as Paul describes it in our New Testament lesson, is for freedom. But freedom in God's kingdom is not free.

We learn this from American History, from our human experience, and from the Bible.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:57

When the Declaration of Independence was drafted in 1776, fifty-six men placed their names beneath the pledge of their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. And they did, indeed, *pay the price*. Nine of the fifty-six died in the war from its hardships; five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. One had two sons captured. Twelve had their homes—from Rhode Island to South Carolina—ransacked, looted, occupied by the British, or burned. Two lost their sons in the army.

Thomas McKean of Delaware was so harassed by the enemy that he was forced to move his family five times in five months. He served in Congress without pay; his family lived in poverty and in hiding.

Thomas Nelson, Jr., of Virginia, raised \$2 million on his own signature to provision our allies, the French fleet. After the war, he personally paid back the loans, which wiped out his entire estate. He was never reimbursed by the U.S. government.

John Hancock, whom history remembers for his courage as well as his large signature, was one of the wealthiest men in New England. As he stood outside Boston one terrible night during the war, he said, “Burn, Boston, though it makes John Hancock a beggar, if the public good requires it.” He, too, lived up to that pledge.

And the stories go on, but the point is the same. Each man fulfilled his pledge. They paid the price, and freedom was born. But now, in our own time, there is a personal journey towards freedom that we too must make, and the lessons for our voyage abound.

Paul reminds us in our New Testament lesson that *“if we live by the Spirit,”*<sup>5</sup> our Lord will bring gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for one another, exuberance about life, and a peace that passes understanding. Paul describes this fruit as *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”*<sup>6</sup>

So if in our Gospel today sounds challenging, rest assured it is. But with the Gospel comes a promise that we can confidently face whatever comes our way. Annie Johnson Flint sums up my message in a poem she wrote. It reads:

God has not promised sun without rain,  
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.

But God has promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the labor, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.<sup>7</sup> Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:16

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>7</sup> Author: Annie Johnson Flint and submitted to the internet by Lita Pretty