

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 13, The Fox, The Funeral & the Furrow, Part III. Luke 9:57-62

1. THE THIRD DIALOGUE:

And another said,

“I will follow you, Lord,

FOLLOW

But first let me (go) and take leave of those at my home.”

GO

And Jesus said,

“No one who puts his hand to the plow,

COST TO HIGH?

And looks back

is of any use in the Kingdom of God.”

2. Like the first volunteer this would-be disciple brashly offers to follow the master. Like the recruit in the second dialogue, he has a precondition. This condition is often translated, “First let me go and say farewell to those at my home.” This request seems as legit as the that of the recruit before it. Surely he would be allowed to go home and say, “good bye.” Elisha when asked to follow Elijah asked time to ‘kiss my father and mother,” (1 Kings 19:20. His request is granted and he even took time to butcher and roast a pair of oxen. It is not reasonable that this volunteer’s request be granted? The answer can only be found in the examination of the exact request.
3. The Greek word traditionally translated as “to say good bye to” is “apostasso.” It can mean to say “good bye or take leave of.” In the NT, 4 times it’s referred to as ‘taking leave.’ The RSV typifies the NT understanding from four texts.
- Mark 6:46, “After he had ‘taken leave’ of them, he went into the hills.”
- Acts 18:18, “After this Paul... ‘took leave’ of the brethren.”
- Acts 18”21, “But ‘taking leave’ of them.”
- 2 Cor. 2:14, “I did not find my brother Titus there, so I ‘took leave’ of them.

4. Only in Luke 9:60, do we see the Greek translated as “saying good-bye.” The distinction between the two translations is important in ME culture. The person who is leaving must request permission to leave from those who are staying. The people who remain behind can say, “good-bye,” to those leaving. This gentle formality is observed to the letter all over the ME in both formal and informal occasions.
5. The one who leaves asks permission to go, “With your permission?” Those who remain behind may respond, “May you go safely, God go with you, May you go in peace.” (Rice) Such responses are granting the permission requested. The RSV Translations listed above properly observe this distinction in all four cases quoted. Jesus and Paul in each case are the ones leaving someone else. Thus they properly ‘take leave of’ those who stay behind. On more formal occasions in the English speaking world this idiom is not entirely lost. At a banquet the guest “takes leave of the host,” in spite of the fact that ‘take leave of,’ translates in all other cases as “apostasso” in modern English versions, in this one case the real intent of the texts has been obscured by translating, ‘say good bye to.’
6. The real point is that the volunteer is asking for the right to go home and get permission from ‘those at home,’ (His parents). Everyone listening to the dialogue knows that naturally the father will refuse to let the boy wander off on some questionable enterprise. Thus the volunteer’s excuse is ready made. Shedding crocodile tears he can loudly insist that he wants to go, but his father will not permit him.
7. The old Syriac translation reflects this as it reads, “let me first explain my case to those in my house.” The Syriac’ fathers knew he wasn’t going home to plant one last fond kiss on his father’s cheek and hear his mother’s words of encouragements. Rather, he was requesting permission to ask those in authority. Some later translations did not maintain this insight.
8. In later Arabic versions, two alternatives appear from the Greek text. The Greek says “Greeting the ones,” The ones may be “the people,” or “the things.” The verb *apotasso* is the verb *tasso* with a preposition added to the front. The verb *tasso* means “fix, order, determine or arrange for.” The addition of prepositions at the beginning of the verb changes its meaning. For nearly 1000 years some Arabic versions have translated it in this fashion, “First let me make arrangements for those at home. (Various Vatican copies. Some see the definite article as neuter not masculine, it would thus read, “First let me arrange for my possessions at home.” A

corrector has changed the “things to people.” The difficulty with this translation is the shaky assumption that the root ‘tasso,’ to arrange for is the intended meaning rather than “to take leave of.” The Arabic versions are evidence that they saw the problem, the volunteer is not going home to say “good bye.” Recognizing that they struggled with a translation would make sense in their cultural world. Rather than the Arabic solutions, the author prefers the Syriac for a starting place.

9. The Old Syriac Version does point on the right direction, the word ‘apostasso’ is translated throughout the NT as “take leave of.” We need to apply this text to the cultural awareness that is asking permission to go. In the cultural sense he is saying, “Lord, I will follow you, but of course my father’s authority is higher than you, thus I need permission before I venture out.” Ibn al –Tayyib says simply, the one who wants to greet his family has his heart tied to that family. In our ME the father has the supreme authority. It is little wonder that the father is thy symbol for God. An engineer in his forties will make a traditional visit from a large metropolitan area to his father in the village to ask permission for foreign travel, a change of job or important business venture. Even if the trip is ceremonial and his son is running his own life, the trip is made as a sign of respect. Rice observes that a ME person in the traditional society of the past would submit all details of his life to his parents.

“On rising, each day, a man offers his prayers, and then goes to his father and mother kissing their hand asking for a blessing. When he begins a new business, he asks the favor of God on his enterprise and ends with a desire that his parent will approve of and bless him in this matter.”

10. The author will never forget a presentation on this subject to a class of ME seminary students as they turned white when this text was expounded with clear affirmation that Jesus is claiming authority higher than the authority of the second volunteer’s father. It is difficult to communicate the stunning shock that comes to a ME reader/listener when the demands of this text are made clear. The shock must be all the more disturbing when the claim was made by a young man (Jesus) in his early 30’s in the 1st century. The only alternatives are acceptance and compliance or rejection and hostility.

11. The form Jesus uses to make this kind of startling affirmation must be examined. Jesus response to the 2nd volunteer is like his response to the 1st volunteer. Each of them is told in a parable that falls into three lines. This later parable is agricultural. Jeremias has provided an accurate/helpful summary of part of the agricultural background of this figure.
“The light Palestinian plow is guided by one hand. This one hand, the left must be the one keeping the plow upright, regulate its depth by pressure and lift it over the rocks and stones in its path. The ploughman uses the other hand to drive the unruly oxen with a goad about two yards long, fitted with an iron spike. At the same time, he must continuously look between the hindquarters of the oxen, keeping the furrow in sight. This primitive type of plough needs dexterity and concentrated attention. If the ploughman looks around the new furrow becomes crooked. Thus whoever wishes to follow Jesus must be resolved to break every link to the past and fix his eye on the coming Kingdom of God. (Jeremias).
12. Not only was the instrument difficult to maneuver, but also the process of plowing a field was far more exacting a task than is generally observed.
“Ploughing was careful and thorough; the first breaking of the stubble after the harvest took the form of furrow opened with broad band between them to facilitate the absorption of the rains. In the ploughing after the first rains, closer furrows divided by ridges were opened for drainage; only at the third ploughing, before sowing, were the furrows close-set without the intervening bands. The final working was to cover the seed... the implement was larger and heavier than the modern Arab plough, which it in general resembled.” (Applebaum)
13. Clearly plowing was a precise operation with strips left initially for the absorption of water. At a later stage furrows were shaped for drainage. A third plowing prepared the soil, and a fourth covered the seed for planting. Obviously anyone wanting to fulfill such a responsibility needed to give undivided attention to what they were doing.
14. The image of Jesus is strong and clear. The tension illustrated is between the loyalty to Jesus as the inaugurator of the Kingdom of God and its all-consuming demands and loyalty to the family. Both loyalties have high priority for serious-minded Christians. When they are in conflict, that conflict is excruciatingly painful. This text is another of the “hard sayings” of which the Gospels are disturbingly full.