

As we enter the long, hot summer of Ordinary Time, it seems only fitting that we reflect on this passage from Luke's gospel. This is a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry – he has decided that he has finished his work in Galilee and now he must turn his face to the south. Jerusalem is the culmination of his mission in more ways than one. He will enter in triumph and exit carrying a cross. Such a contradictory prospect must have been equally satisfying and terrifying. He is now fully aware of what the Father is asking of him and this knowledge colors his responses to the three would-be followers he encounters on the way.

The first man declares that he will follow Jesus wherever he goes – a wonderful *heroic* statement, yes? I'll be the best disciple you've ever seen, Jesus! I like to think that Jesus smiled at this eager, young man. Mr. Enthusiasm. Do you really understand where I'm going, he asks? The second man Jesus encounters asks for a reasonable delay – let me go first and bury my father. We're led to believe that the man's father is lying on his death bed back home, but that's not what he means. This turn of phrase, common to the time, means that the man wants to fulfill his familial responsibility first, then follow Jesus. He was probably a first-born son, so he was expected to help his father with the planting and the livestock, keeping things together until his father eventually dies. It's still an extraordinary offer – the man is basically saying he'll sell everything at that time and then follow Jesus. Let's call this guy Mr. Obligation. Jesus' answer, even if gently said, must have been a shock. *Let the dead bury their dead*. Basically, you've got your priorities messed up, Mr. Obligation. The third would-be follower wants to say good-bye to the home crowd first. Once again, Jesus sees through the delaying tactic. What this guy really wants is his family's blessing on this new venture. Yeah, Mr. Approval. Jesus' answer is simple – if you're always looking for approval, always looking over your shoulder for the crowd's reaction, then your motivation is completely wrong. You'll never be my follower.

What do Mr. Enthusiasm, Mr. Obligation, and Mr. Approval have in common? You could logically say that none of them really understood what following Jesus means. Yes, correct. But more to the point, they've each placed a condition on discipleship:

- Mr. Enthusiasm: as long as it's exciting, full of miraculous moments, and just challenging enough, I'm in. Kind of like walking the Camino with 4-star hotels.

- Mr. Obligation: I'll get to you Jesus eventually – I just need to finish school, get married, have kids, and retire first. Then I'm all yours.
- Mr. Approval: Let me post every step on Facebook and Snapchat so my followers can like me along the way. I'll include lots of pictures of churches so you know I'm serious.

I'm glad you're chuckling, because believe me, Jesus is as well. He doesn't dislike people like this – he's glad that they're willing to try. What drives Jesus nuts is when following Him is seen as just one option among many equally competing options. Jesus is not priority one, not by a long shot. Where is Jesus on your list of priorities? It's simple to find out. Answer these questions: What do you think about most of the time? Where do you spend your money? What do you do each day? You see, a choice to follow Jesus changes your life. Period. It becomes the be-all and end-all of your existence. Your first question in the morning? What is Jesus asking of me today? Your last question as you hit the pillow? How did I do today, Jesus? And even if you do try to follow Jesus, with all sincerity and focus, he's still going to challenge your pre-conceived notions.

A couple of weeks ago, my buddy Mark and I were heading down to the state prison to visit the inmates and share the Word. We were two Mr. Enthusiasms. We pulled up at the main gate and the guard asked us where we were going. "Yard B for bible study," I replied. "Why?" he asked. "Bible study," I repeated, thinking that he hadn't heard me. The guard peered at me intently and asked again, "Why?" I put the car in Park and said to him, "Talk to me." He looked around – it was just us – and he said, "I'll probably get in trouble for this, but I want to know. Why are you good people spending time with these losers, where there are at least one or two victims for every one of these guys in here? Who's helping the victims?" To put it mildly, it was a startling question. In 18 years of prison ministry, I've never had a guard ask me that question. I've heard the first part of that question many times – why are you helping these "fill in the blank" scumbags – but his plea for the victims was a new twist. I looked at him and said, "You know, that's a really good question, and I respect you for asking it. We're just here to try to save some lost souls." He pointed to the patch on his shirt sleeve. "This patch says our mission is correction and rehabilitation. That 's a bunch of hooey – there's no rehabilitation going on in here. Why don't you help those who really need the help?" I looked at him, smiled, and said, "You know, we all need the help – thanks for your honesty." He opened the gate and we went in.

The question has been rolling around in my mind ever since. Don't get me wrong. I'm not tossing away prison ministry. It's desperately needed because any crime, any sin for that matter, damages both the victim *and* the perpetrator. In our society, we conveniently store all of the perpetrators in the same place! There is a certain ease of access to this severely damaged population that we leverage in the name of Jesus. Victims, however, live everywhere. So I did some research. I pretended to be a crime victim and did some Internet searches. It was quite interesting. If you're looking for help from secular sources, there are several options. Most involve calling 800 numbers first, where you'll be slotted to the appropriate counselor. It appears that the two main offerings are compensation and counseling. Nothing wrong with either, but I wondered if that was it. I decided to check out the Catholic response by accessing the US Congregation of Catholic Bishops. There's a lot of stuff about supporting crime victims on this site for sure, but the crimes were all sexual abuse crimes. Not exactly what I had in mind...But there was one mention on the site that caught my eye – restorative justice. And guess who's leading the way? San Diego. What is restorative justice? Simple, yet profound. Restorative Justice puts perpetrators and their victims in the same room, with trained facilitators, in an attempt to help each party *see* the other person. It is particularly impactful for the perpetrator, as you can imagine, because crime is disproportionately committed by young people. What better way to break through than to show the true human pain caused by crime? This process is not for every crime or every crime victim – many victims are too terrorized to face their perpetrators. But recognize that a criminal rarely begins his life of crime with a horrendous action – it's usually small stuff leading to medium stuff leading to hard crime. Isn't it better to intervene early?

If you've been listening to me talk about prison ministry over the years, you know that this is a special calling. Not everyone has an interest or an inclination to enter a prison. I get that. But what about the victims? Can you help balance the scale? Does it sound too good to be true? There are a bunch of brochures in the vestibule of the Church – grab one. The Restorative Justice Mediation Program needs people who want to help repair the damage caused by crime. You will be trained! And, when I see that guard again, I'm going to hand him this brochure.

Jesus is calling, asking, begging to be nudged up your priority ladder. Here's a way to do that.