

# Cybercolumn by Brett Younger: When Jesus comes to Sunday school

October 5, 2007

Posted: 10/05/07

## CYBER COLUMN: When Jesus comes to Sunday school

**By Brett Younger**

Leon Lyles has been teaching Sunday school since Lyndon Johnson was president. He teaches a bit like Johnson would, but without the colorful language and Democratic politics. He knows the Bible like Johnson knew the Constitution. He knows Genesis to Revelation and the footnotes at the bottom of the page. In fact, more than anything else, he teaches the footnotes.

Leon begins: "The lesson today is from the ninth chapter of Luke. This passage requires scholars such as ourselves to dig deep into the first century world. Verses 57-58, and I am reading, as I always will, from the King James Version, 'A certain man said unto him, "Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest." And Jesus said unto him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."'"

Brett Younger
------------------

“Now, class, some misinterpret this text as indicating that Jesus means what he says and that he was not rich as we know he was. John Calvin, a French theologian and lawyer from the 16th century, and I’m reading from his commentary which was translated by William Pringle in 1845—I would have made my own translation but I have misplaced my copy, if you borrowed it please return it no questions will be asked—points out, ‘It is strange that Christ should say, that he had not a foot of earth on which he could lay his head, while there were many godly and benevolent persons, who would willingly receive him into their houses.’

“Now, class, whenever we come to one of the many passages in the Bible that seem to indicate that Jesus was poor, we need to look long enough and dig deep enough to find an explanation.

“Verses 59-60, ‘And Jesus said unto another, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father.” Jesus said unto him, “Let the dead bury their dead. Go you thou and preach the kingdom.”’

“Now, class, this is not a passage that you find in advertisements for funeral homes, but listen again to the great Protestant reformer John Calvin, ‘By these words, Christ does not condemn burial. We know that the custom of burying originated in a divine command, and was practiced by the saints.’ We can thus conclude that this passage should not be used as support for cremation.

“Calvin then indicates that if this man had not been called to preach the kingdom he could have stayed with his father, ‘Had he remained in a private station, there would have been no absolute necessity for leaving his father.’ Verse 60 is clearly more than enough justification for church members to complain about their pastor with or without cause.

“The third would-be slacker disciple said, ‘Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house.’ And Jesus

said unto him, 'No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'

"In the first century Middle Eastern culture, the person who is leaving requests permission to leave from those who are staying behind. This man is asking to go home and get permission. Now he knew that his parents wouldn't let him go wandering around after Jesus. This failure, just like the others, is only pretending to be committed. He is a mama's boy who never ploughed a row or even drove a pick-up."

Leon talks for an hour without using a single question mark and only a few commas. He shows remarkable expertise concerning 16th century interpreters, 19th century translators, and how to explain away the hard parts. He has extensive knowledge and an unwavering commitment to defend whatever he's always thought. What he never does is ask, "Where might Christ lead us that we don't want to follow?" The people in Leon's class learn a lot of footnotes. God love them. They really believe it's what God wants them to do.

Martha Martin started teaching just after Kinky Friedman ran for governor of Texas. She teaches a bit like Kinky would, but without the colorful language and peculiar politics. Martha hasn't read nearly as many footnotes as Leon, but she's trying to follow Jesus.

Martha begins: "In this story in Luke's Gospel, Jesus meets three would-be disciples. They all say that they want to follow, but Jesus turns them down. This is a hard story for most of us, because we've said that we want to follow Jesus, but we try not to think about the ways we don't follow.

"The first candidate enthusiastically promises, 'I'll follow you wherever you go.' When someone walks the aisle and says, 'I want to follow Jesus,' our response is 'That's great,' but Jesus says, 'We're not staying at the Holiday Inn.' I'd like to think I would follow Jesus even if it meant I would have no

roof over my head, but I honestly don't know.

"The second person says, 'I need to make arrangements for my father's funeral.' What I'd like Jesus to say is, 'Not a problem, I understand,' but Jesus refuses. I often tell God that I'll get back to following as soon as I take care of a few other responsibilities.

"The third potential disciple says, 'I'm ready to follow, but first I need to get things straightened out at home.' It's always hard for us to hear that, according to Jesus, church is more important than family.

"Jesus says to all of us, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom.'"

Martha smiles as she says, as you might guess, "I've never plowed, but I'm told that back when farmers used plows, they would choose a point in the distance and move toward it. Any looking around or over the shoulder would lead to crooked furrows and a plowing disaster. No one who commits and then looks for excuses is fit for the kingdom.

"I would like this passage more if when prospective disciples tell Jesus they want to follow, Jesus said, 'Wonderful! Glad to have you in the family' and everybody hugged. Instead, Jesus confronts us with the truth that we're not as committed as we'd like to believe. Our desires for comfort, wealth, even family, get in the way of our promise to follow.

'But as I studied this story, I found something that gives me great hope. The Aramaic word for follow doesn't mean to follow behind, it means shoulder to shoulder. It's not, 'Do this after me.' It's 'Do this with me.' Our hope is that we follow Christ with Christ and not on our own.'

Martha asks her class, "What keeps you from following?" A few are surprised as people name not what we think of as temptations, but "a lack of time," "work," "household responsibilities," "the ease with which we

make excuses.”

Then Martha says, “Right now, this moment, think about how God might be calling you to follow.” They consider their commitments. They wonder, think and pray. They silently promise to live for the kingdom, share with people who have no place to lay their heads, and plow a different future. God loves them and that’s what God wants them to do.

The comfortable approach of reading the Bible as history rather than as an invitation to serve will always be more popular, but it has little to do with following Christ.

*Brett Younger is pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth and the author of Who Moved My Pulpit? A Hilarious Look at Ministerial Life, available from Smyth & Helwys (800) 747-3016. You can e-mail him at [byounger@broadwaybc.org](mailto:byounger@broadwaybc.org).*

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.