

Avoiding Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Before we can labor faithfully in the Lord's vineyard, we must recognize the many gentle and respectable ways by which a servant's heart learns to avoid the work. The Scriptures are candid about this. Moses hid behind his unfit lips. Jonah ran to Tarshish. The rich young ruler turned sorrowfully away. The invited guests in the parable sent polite excuses. None of these stories is about monstrous wickedness; each is about a human heart finding a reasonable way to step back from a call. In this lesson we look at the faces avoidance wears in a servant's life, why it works so quietly on us, and what grace the Lord has provided so that our 'no' can be turned into a yes. The goal is not self-reproach but clear-eyed honesty — the honesty without which none of us will finish the race.

The Many Faces of Avoidance

Avoidance rarely announces itself. It does not say, 'I will not serve the Lord today.' It speaks in the language of reasonable constraints and appropriate priorities. A servant who has learned to spot its voice is a servant who has taken a large step toward fidelity.

Jonah is perhaps the clearest portrait in the Scriptures. The Lord said 'Go to Nineveh.' Jonah's feet were already moving toward Tarshish before his prayer had finished. 'But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord' (Jonah 1:3). The direction is striking: not toward Nineveh, not toward another assignment, but away from the presence of the Lord. Avoidance, when we follow it far enough, always points us away from Him.

Moses, by contrast, shows us avoidance dressed in humility. 'O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue' (Exodus 4:10). It sounds self-effacing. It is also a refusal. The Lord's patience with Moses is lovely, but it is patience with a reluctance that was real.

The invited guests in our Lord's parable give us the most modern face of avoidance:

"But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'" Luke 14:18–20, NKJV

Land, labor, family. Not evils — goods. Each guest had a good reason. And yet the evening of the Master's supper passed them by. The most dangerous avoidances of the servant are almost always defended by something good.

For our own examination, it helps to name the common varieties: the busyness that never quite frees a Saturday; the self-doubt that waits for credentials that will never come; the perfectionism that will start serving once circumstances are right; the over-commitment that has no room to say yes because it has not learned to say no; the private hurt that makes us step back from the very people the Lord is asking us to step toward. None of these is wicked; each, unchallenged, quietly absorbs the life of a would-be servant.

The Root Beneath the Faces

Underneath the many faces of avoidance there is almost always a single root: fear. Sometimes it is the fear we examined in the previous lesson — fear of man, fear of failure. Sometimes it is a more tender fear: the fear of being changed. The servant who truly gives himself to the Lord will not come back the same. He will be asked to love people he had not planned to love, to forgive what he had not planned to forgive, to let go of what he had not planned to release. The Lord does not hide this cost, and a part of us knows it, and the part that knows it often pulls on the brake.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” Matthew 16:24, NKJV

Chrysostom speaks gently to this fear:

“Why do many turn away from the Master's call? Not because they hate the Master, but because they love the cross less than they love their ease. Yet the cross, when it is embraced, is found to be lighter than the burden of avoiding it.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew LV.2

The pastoral point is important. Most people who are avoiding service are not rebels; they are simply afraid. A servant who understands this will treat himself — and others who are hesitating — with the tenderness the Lord Himself showed to Moses at the burning bush.

Busyness as a Shield

One particular face of avoidance deserves its own paragraph because it is the most common in our time. It is busyness — a life so full of approved activity that there is no room to hear the call more deeply. Busyness is the respectable avoidance. It makes us look responsible while we are, in fact, arranging our schedule so that the Lord cannot interrupt us.

“And they all with one accord began to make excuses.” Luke 14:18, NKJV

The servant must periodically audit his calendar with this question: is any of what fills my week actually a hiding place? The answer will often be surprising. Not always — work and family are real callings — but sometimes. The practice of a weekly quiet hour before the Lord, calendar in hand, is one of the most faithful disciplines a servant can keep.

St. Basil, who pastored a large and active city, writes with a clarity worth carrying:

“We fill our lives with many things that have no weight in heaven, and then wonder that we have no time for the One who has weight in heaven and earth. Let us begin every season by asking what must be laid aside, and then by laying it aside in fact.” St. Basil the Great, Letter II (To Gregory)

The Cost of Avoidance

It is important to face, with sobriety and without fear, what is at stake when avoidance wins. Jonah is again our teacher. His running did not keep him safe; it put him in a storm, and in the belly of a great fish, and in a darkness he had not bargained for. The Lord's mercy retrieved him — and it will retrieve us — but the storm is real.

The parable of the talents, which we will study in the next lesson, ends with a judgment we would rather not quote but must. The servant who hid his talent was not condemned for wickedness in the ordinary sense; he was condemned for fear that had become refusal.

“His lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant...'" Matthew 25:26, NKJV

The word 'lazy' here is the Greek *okneros* — hesitant, shrinking, given to drawing back. The Lord uses a surprisingly strong word for what looks, from the outside, like modest caution. The reason is clear: the kingdom is not served by burying what has been entrusted to us. Our gifts are for the using.

The cost of avoidance is also felt in the souls we might have served. There is a classroom, a parish, a neighbor, a cousin, a child who would have been reached by our yes, and who will not be reached if our yes never comes. We do not know who these people are, but the Lord does. Every servant who is tempted to back away from the work should pause for a moment and consider whether a name he does not yet know is waiting for the sentence only he can speak.

The Grace That Meets Our Reluctance

The Scriptures are not harsh with reluctance; they are patient with it. The Lord answered Moses not with a rebuke but with a brother: 'Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well... And you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth' (Exodus 4:14–15). The Lord answered Jonah by following him into the storm. The Lord answered Peter's denials not with dismissal but with a lakeside breakfast and three renewed invitations to feed His sheep.

This is our hope when we see avoidance in ourselves. The Lord does not shame us for it. He simply, tenderly, calls again. The right response to noticing that we have been avoiding is not despair or self-punishment; it is to turn and come back.

“Return to Me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” Malachi 3:7, NKJV

Macarius, writing to monks who had many reasons to give up, gives a warm sentence that every servant should memorize:

“If the soul that has drawn back will but turn her face again toward the Lord, she shall find Him already standing in the road to meet her. For He never ceased going out in search of her, even while she was going out in search of reasons.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XIX (paraphrased)

Saying Yes Today

Avoidance is defeated not by resolutions for next month but by a small yes today. The servant who is listening will usually know what today's yes is. It is the email he has been postponing, the conversation he has been rehearsing, the commitment he has been half-making. Our Lord's method is almost always to ask for the next small step, not the whole staircase.

It also helps to name, specifically, what we are avoiding. Avoidance lives on vagueness. The moment we write down the thing — 'I have been avoiding calling my brother for six months,' or 'I have been avoiding saying yes to teaching Sunday school' — it begins to lose its hold. Confession is once again the great unbinder. Many a servant's first step out of a long avoidance has been a frank word spoken to a father of confession.

And it helps to remember that we are not being asked to serve on our own strength. The same Lord who calls us promises to come with us. 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). The yes we give today is met by a grace we could not have produced, and it is that grace, not our courage, that will carry the work.

May the Lord who has called us by name have patience with our running, and may He call us again, as He called Jonah, as He called Moses, as He called Peter, as He called each saint whose name we love. May He deliver us from the respectable avoidances of our time — the calendar too full, the excuse too reasonable, the self-doubt too familiar — and may He draw from us today, not tomorrow, the small yes that places us once again in the path of His work. Every yes given today becomes, by His grace, the foundation of a faithful life.

Review Questions

1. Of the faces of avoidance named in this lesson (busyness, self-doubt, perfectionism, over-commitment, private hurt), which is most active in us right now, and how do we recognize its voice?
2. Jonah's flight pointed away 'from the presence of the Lord.' When our own avoidance is followed to its source, where does it point, and what does that tell us?
3. The invited guests in Luke 14 used goods (land, labor, family) to decline the Master's supper. Which of the good things in our life has lately been quietly used to say 'excuse me' to Him?

4. Fear of being changed often lies under our reluctance to serve. What change is the Lord currently asking us to allow Him to make, and what gentle step could we take toward it this week?
5. Busyness is the respectable avoidance. If we audited this week's calendar in a quiet hour before the Lord, what is one thing we might see that we have not been willing to see?
6. The parable of the talents condemns the servant not for wickedness but for hesitation that became refusal. Where has our own hesitation begun to harden, and what would renewed investment look like?
7. Malachi offers the Lord's word: 'Return to Me, and I will return to you.' What is the one small 'today yes' by which we might turn and begin the return?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, LV. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 10.
- St. Basil the Great, Letters. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 8.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies. Translated by A. J. Mason. SPCK, 1921.
- St. Augustine, Sermons on the Gospel of Luke (on Luke 14).
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Book of Jonah.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes