

2. There's No-one Like Jesus: Discipleship is not easy

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[0 : 00] Well now, you might like to turn with me to Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 8. We're continuing this little series in Matthew, Chapter 8, under the title, There's No One Like Jesus.

And today, our passage is verses 18 to 22, just a short passage. Matthew 8, verses 18 to 22. It's on page 813 in our Pew Bibles.

So, verse 18. Now, when Jesus saw a great crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.

And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Another of the disciples said to him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

And Jesus said to him, follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead. Well, this is the word of the Lord, and we pray that he will add his blessing to it.

[1 : 15] Now, why should Matthew, the evangelist, include these lines at this point in his story? We do have two very striking sayings from the Lord Jesus.

His words in verse 20, foxes have holes and so on. And then his words in verse 22, about the dead burying their own dead. But why does Jesus say these things, and why does Matthew record them for us?

That's the question. And it may take us a minute or two to begin to see the answer to it. So let's begin by noticing how busy Jesus was at this point.

I guess he was always busy, but it's very obvious at this point in the Gospel. He's just preached his great sermon on the mount in chapters 5, 6, and 7. And have a look at the penultimate verse of chapter 7, 728.

When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching. He was a Christian, crowds, not just a crowd, crowds, huge numbers of people. Not just dozens, I guess there would have been thousands there.

[2 : 22] We know from other parts of the Gospels that on different occasions he fed 5,000 people, or 4,000 people. Or look on to chapter 8, verse 1. He came down from the mountain where he preached the sermon, and great crowds followed him.

The same thing. Then a leper steps forward and is healed. The leper knelt before him, verse 2 tells us. But it's all very public. This poor leper was being watched by thousands.

Then we have the conversation with the Roman centurion, which we looked at last week. Again, all very public. Look at verse 10. When Jesus heard his words, he marveled and said to those who followed him, to the crowd who were milling around.

And then in verse 16, that evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and so on. Lots of people in great need.

And he healed them all. So when we get to verse 18, and Jesus again sees a great crowd around him, it's hardly surprising that he gives orders to cross over to the other side of the lake, presumably to have a bit of a breather.

[3 : 29] But as he sets off down towards the water's edge, a scribe comes up to him in verse 19, and then this other man in verse 21, and it's not until we reach verse 23 that Jesus finally manages to get into a boat and quickly sinks into a sleep.

But even then he only manages about five minutes sleep before he has to deal with a violent storm. So Jesus seems to be living life in the fast lane. Crowds always around him, many people there with pressing needs, which he was seeking to meet.

But, in the midst of all this pressure of people, Jesus seems to be following a carefully focused agenda. And that is his purpose of calling disciples to follow him.

And we first see this right back at the beginning of his public ministry, back in chapter 4, where he calls two sets of brothers who are fishermen. First of all, Andrew and Simon, and then the brothers James and John.

He says to Andrew and Simon, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. And Matthew tells us, immediately they left their nets and followed him.

[4 : 37] And you'll see the process goes on in this part of the gospel as well. Just turn over to chapter 9 and verse 9. Jesus called Matthew, the author of the gospel.

Jesus passed on from there, and he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, follow me. That's the characteristic verb, isn't it? Follow me. Then a little bit later, at the beginning of chapter 10, you'll see Jesus calls his 12 disciples, the 12 apostles, and he authorizes their ministry.

So Matthew is showing us how Jesus is dealing with people at two different levels. First of all, there are these great crowds with all their needs, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, is how Jesus sees them in chapter 9, verse 36.

But secondly, the second level, out of this great mass of thousands, Jesus is committed to the task of identifying and calling and training disciples, whose work it will be to spread the gospel amongst the harassed and helpless crowds, like laborers in the fields of harvest.

So the few are to be trained for the sake of the many. Now our passage for today, chapter 8, verses 18 to 22, needs to be seen in this context.

[5 : 59] We have the great crowds who are following Jesus after a fashion. But we also have various individuals who may or may not prove to be real disciples, may or may not prove to be committed, focused followers.

And the two men that we meet in verses 19 to 22 are men that Matthew presents to us with a big question mark over their heads. The question is, are these two men fair-weather followers of Jesus or might they prove to be the real thing?

And of course, Matthew's spotlight doesn't simply rest upon these two men. Automatically, it swings round and finds us as well. Because the implication of Matthew is, what about you, my readers?

What sort of followers are you? Will you prove to be just members of the great crowd who have a superficial interest in Jesus? Or will you prove to be serious, focused disciples?

So let's look at the snippets of conversation that Jesus has with these two men. And we'll find that Jesus' comments show us two things. First, that following him involves sitting light to earthly securities.

[7 : 12] And second, that following him demands that we put him first in our priorities. So first of all then, from verses 19 and 20, following Jesus involves sitting light to earthly securities.

Here's verse 19. A scribe came up and said to him, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus replied, Splendid, my man. How lovely to see your unbounded enthusiasm.

You're just the sort of man I want. Fall in behind and off we go together on our glorious adventure.

Now, of course, I'm spoofing, aren't I? Jesus said nothing of the kind. I think that's the kind of thing I would have said to somebody who came up to me.

I would have been delighted to find a fresh-faced young fellow come up to me and say, I will follow you wherever you go. Wherever. It's a *carte blanche* word, isn't it?

I'll follow you to the South Pole if that's where you're going. I'll follow you to the center of the earth if that's where the whim takes you. In that word, wherever, the man seems to be expressing limitless loyalty to Jesus.

[8 : 21] But Jesus' reply in verse 20 doesn't sound very encouraging. It seems more designed to put the man off than to welcome him on board. Look at his words.

Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. Why foxes? And why birds?

I think the reason is because they are so mobile. They're two of the most mobile members of the animal kingdom. A fit and healthy fox, I've done my research, can cover 40 miles in one night as he roams about looking for a hen house that somebody has forgotten to lock up for the night.

I know this all too well. I have a flock of chickens at home and a couple of months ago a fox broke in and killed 15 of my hens and three cockerels, including a cockerel whose name was Willie Phillip.

Willie Phillip had the finest crow in all of Ayrshire, a resonant baritone. Now foxes are very mobile, but Jesus says to this man, they have holes.

[9 : 32] They have a safe, secure den. So after their nocturnal adventures and sorties, they can return to the security of their burrow and lie up underground in peace and safety.

And the birds of the air, just the same. Think of the swallows which arrive here in Scotland in the spring every year. Our swallows that live in and around Glasgow, many of them now only two or three months old, just hatched in May or June, they're preparing to fly to Africa.

Baby birds of two or three months. Birds fly enormous distances. Even the blackbirds and the song crushes in our gardens clock up the air miles, don't they? But, says Jesus, they have their nests or roosts, the places they can return to for safety after all those hours on the wing.

But, by contrast, Jesus says to the scribe, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. So, what is Jesus saying to this man?

He's saying, my friend, your words sound very big and brave and bold, but have you considered what you might be letting yourself in for if you follow me? I have nowhere to lay my head.

[10 : 41] I'm a wanderer. I have no permanent home on earth. And if you follow me, you'll find it's exactly the same for you. So, Jesus is challenging this man to think through the implications of being a serious disciple.

Being a serious Christian is not like a jolly day out on Great Cumbria Island finishing up with an ice cream and a fish supper. It's a way of life which will at times be searchingly demanding for the disciple.

Now, this verse 20 is so challenging because it goes against all our natural inclinations. Our natural inclination is to provide ourselves with a fox's burrow and a bird's nest.

Or to use the modern phrase, we know what our comfort zone is and we want to stay in it. So, it's second nature to us to secure for ourselves a decent house or flat to live in.

And once we've got the decent house or flat, we like to fill it up with comforting things so as to make it feel even snuggler and safer. Now, I don't want to misrepresent the Lord Jesus here.

[11 : 48] When he says that he has nowhere to lay his head, I don't think he means that it's wrong for us to own houses or to sleep in beds. He's talking, surely, about an attitude to the securities of this life that real disciples need to cultivate.

And that is an attitude that sits loose to earthly security. Let me give an example. One of our new students for the Cornhill training course which begins next week is a young man from Delhi in India. And he just arrived in Scotland a few days ago and he came across, he lives in Edinburgh, but he came across to meet me here in Glasgow a couple of days ago. And as we sat and talked and I welcomed him and said how nice it was to see him, I realised just how costly it is for this young man to do what he's doing.

He has left his country, his people, his fiancée. You won't see her for quite a few months. He's left his 34 degrees temperature as it is in Delhi.

He was wearing three or four rather thick layers and was looking decidedly chilly. I did point out to him that it was only September and he could look for things to get worse as the year goes on.

[12 : 58] But there's a young man who is way out of his comfort zone. My heart went out to him. But why has he come from Delhi to Glasgow? So as to train to be a more effective servant and follower of Christ.

In terms of our verse 20, this young man has left his fox's burrow and his bird's nest and he's following in the footsteps of his master who had nowhere to lay his head. It's a lovely thing to see. Now don't we need to see this spirit of risk-taking discipleship in our churches today? Just think of some of the younger Christians that you know. Maybe people in their teens or their twenties.

What if one such person, a young Christian, came to you as an older person and asked for some advice? And the young Christian says to you, I'm wondering whether to train as a missionary or whether to pursue a career in such and such a safe, lucrative job.

How would you advise such a person? What if it was your own son or daughter or grandchild? You could take them to this very verse of scripture and explain the challenge of Jesus.

[14 : 04] You could help that young person to establish early in their life the principle of being willing to take risks for the Lord. A precedent of that kind set early in life is something that a person will follow through.

But this is a challenge for the older ones amongst us too. Now it may not be appropriate if you're 70 to go to Japan and aim to spend the next 25 years there as a missionary. You probably wouldn't last that long.

But verse 20 is about a whole attitude of being prepared to take risks for the sake of the gospel. Doing things with your money, your time and your home which might seem to threaten your personal security.

Things that take you out of your comfort zone for the sake of Christ. So there's the first thing. Following Jesus involves sitting light to earthly securities. Now secondly from verses 21 and 22 following Jesus demands that we put him first in our priorities.

In verse 21 another man described by Matthew as a disciple says to Jesus Lord let me first go and bury my father. In other words I do want to follow you but there's something I must attend to first.

[15:24] Now it's that word first which gives his game away. Probably all he means by it is first in time but Jesus who understands human nature so profoundly sees that first as possibly being first in importance as well as first in time and that's why he gives this apparently harsh reply follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.

Now the man's request let me go and bury my father it's a rather odd one. In the Middle East as you know the weather is much hotter than it is in our northern climate up here when we have a death in the family very often the burial takes place a week or so after the death but you can't do that in the Middle East because the body begins to decompose so quickly in the heat and decomposition brings a very nasty smell.

You can't have granddad lying in the front room for several days in the Middle East so you have to bury your dead within hours of the death taking place. So it's most unlikely that this man's father had died but was lying unburied at home.

What the man may well have meant was I'm having to look after my father at present so I can't consider being an active disciple for the foreseeable future but as soon as I've buried my father I'm your man.

But the father might have lived another decade or twenty years. So Jesus is saying to this man the time to follow me is now. Let other people sort out those family concerns.

[16:59] Your job is to put me first. Now when he says leave the dead to bury their own dead he perhaps means leave the spiritually dead to bury the physically dead.

But if you want to be spiritually alive young man put me and my concerns first. Now I think we need to take these words of Jesus in verse 22 in the context of his wider teaching about family relationships.

Jesus as you know upheld the law of Moses fiercely and that includes the commandment to honour our father and mother. You remember how Jesus became angry with a group of Pharisees because they were neglecting the law of looking after father and mother in favour of a Jewish tradition that they called Korban which contravened it.

and yet Jesus also insisted that it was even more important to love him than to love one's family. So if you turn over to Matthew chapter 10 verse 37 10:37 you'll see that he says whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

I remember a moment a year or so ago when I was sitting at the tea table with my family my wife and I have two little girls who are now aged 9 and 12 I guess they were a year younger then but we were discussing some aspect of being a Christian at the tea table and one of my little girls looked at me and said daddy who do you love more Jesus or me and Harriet?

[18:32] Now I had to pause that was a question that searched me so it took me a few seconds and I think I said something like this well girls I love you as much as I can love any human being on earth but I do love Jesus more because in the end he is the most important person there is and I said to them it's right for you to love him more than you love me and mummy.

So to turn back to chapter 8 verse 22 what Jesus is teaching this would-be follower is that important though family concerns are to follow him is always going to be more important.

He is not saying that when our nearest and dearest relatives die we shouldn't see to arranging their funerals and so on but he is searching out our underlying attitudes and commitments.

Are our nearest and dearest relatives our top priority or is Jesus our top priority. Now we might want to say but surely he is not asking us to choose between him and our families but I think Matthew would say that is precisely the choice he is asking us to make.

The question is do family concerns override his concerns or alternatively do we seek to bring our families as well as ourselves under his lordship?

[19 : 58] there is a big difference between the two and it is the difference between a superficial discipleship and a real discipleship. So as we look at these two men and the words that Jesus says to them we realise that it is going to be very costly at times to be a real disciple of his.

He is asking us to sit light to earthly security and to put him first over every competing priority. Is it too unbearably hard?

Not when we consider what he has done for us. Just think of it. He left the glory and bliss and joy and perfection and delight of heaven in order to come to our rescue.

He involved himself with sinful and rebellious human beings. Despite his wonderful teaching and his beautiful life he endured mocking and jeering and opposition and hatred and eventually crucifixion. He died for us so that we should be forgiven and saved. The good shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. He endured the holy anger of God so that you and I should not have to endure it.

[21 : 16] you see we're not being asked by a cold-hearted tyrant to put him and his concerns first. Rather we're being asked by one who has loved us to the point of death.

As somebody said if Jesus Christ be God and died for me can any sacrifice be too great for me to make for him? There is no one like Jesus and that's why he has the right to say to each one of us follow me.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Our dear Lord Jesus we praise you for this wonderful command and together we acknowledge that there is nothing more glorious or lovely or delightful than to be able to follow you and to be a member of your people a member of your band of soldiers who are to stand up for you.

So we pray that you'll help us to cast caution to the winds to remember that you have done all this for us and particularly that you have laid down your life for us so that we might gladly lay down our lives in return for you and be prepared to serve you with everything that we have and we ask it for your dear namesake Amen.

Amen.