

Follow Him! Full Throttle Following Matthew 8:18-27

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18 Now when Jesus saw a great crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. 19 And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." 20 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." 21 Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." 22 And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. 24 And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. 25 And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." 26 And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. 27 And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?" (Matt 8:18-27).

Matthew chapter 8 ushered us into a new section of scripture in our verse by verse study of the glorious gospel. Since the beginning of the year we have moved from understanding Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, sent to bring the kingdom of God to the world (chapters 1-4), to his signature sermon called the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-6). The first 6 chapters introduced us to Jesus and laid out his teaching.

Chapters 8-10 are all about what Jesus does and what it means to follow Him. In this section we will find various miracles and short segments of teaching all focused on helping us understand what true discipleship is. Chapters 8-9 record 10 different miracles, and Matthew arranges them differently than other authors because he is not just recording history; he is trying to tell us something about Jesus. Chapter 10 then highlights basic teaching about what it means to follow Jesus. For example: "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16).

Introducing Discipleship

Two weeks ago we began our new section called "Follow Him" by looking at three marginalized people – a leper, a centurion and a woman. The three stories introduced us to Jesus' miracles and the way that he reached out to the marginalized. Our text this morning introduces us to another and very important subject: discipleship. Now the word discipleship begs a number of

questions. What does it mean to follow Jesus? Who is a true follower? What do real disciples look like? What does discipleship involve? What does it cost?

Now the reason that this is coming up is because of what we find in 8:1 and 8:18 – “When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him...Now when Jesus saw a great crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.” Jesus’ ministry is popular; he has lots of followers. However, what does real discipleship look like?

Matthew’s aim is to teach us about discipleship through three stories: a hasty scholar, a reluctant recruit, and a group of fearful followers. Each of them has important lessons about discipleship.

Hasty Scholar: “Talk is Cheap”

The crowds had apparently pressed on Jesus and his disciples so they crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (v 18). When they arrived on shore, Jesus was greeted by a scribe.

A scribe was professional student of the Law. The priests had been corrupted by their wealth and distracted by their politics, and it was the scribes who were known for protecting, guarding, and explaining the Law. They were often connected to the Pharisees, and they served as teachers of the people, often being called Rabbi. They made a profession of explaining what the Law really said, and they were highly regarded by the people.

This scribe meets Jesus and makes a remarkable statement (v 19): “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” At face value his statement seems genuine, but Jesus response (v 20) indicates that it is not. What is going on here?

The problem is that the focus of his statement is not Jesus or following; it is himself. Three reasons why we could conclude this:

1. He refers to Jesus as “teacher,” not Lord. Only non-disciples of Jesus refer to him this way (see Mt 12:38, 19:16, 22:16).¹
2. The emphasis is on himself – “I will follow you.”
3. He overstates his commitment – “wherever you go.”

It appears that this man thinks that he is quite a catch! He arrogantly approaches Jesus and announces – not requests – that he will join Jesus. Maybe he was attracted to Jesus’ teaching or his works. Maybe he thought he was going to be the resident scholar in the group. Maybe he was thinking Jesus would be thrilled. Regardless, the man’s motives are clear to Jesus, and he is not impressed.

¹ Fredrick Bruner, The Christbook – Matthew 1-12, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 394.

Jesus responds with a quirky statement: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). What does this mean? Jesus, knowing the shallowness of the hasty scholar's statement, is addressing the true cost of following him. Jesus is telling the scribe that following him is not a life of fame and esteem; it is life of homelessness and poverty. Jesus wants this man (and us) to know that there are real costs in following him. He's not ready to sign up every person who says, "I will follow you" because many will not follow through when the cost gets high. There are many people who come to Jesus with passion but fizzle out.

One of the greatest illustrations of this is the parable of the soils in Matthew 13. In that parable, Jesus paints the picture of a person spreading seed on four different kinds of soils (along the path, rocky ground, among thorns, and good ground). The seed represents the gospel, and the soils represent different kinds of people. The rocky soil parallels our text this morning, and we find it in Matthew 13:5-6 & 20:

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away (Matt 13:5-6).

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away (Matt 13:20-21).

Jesus helps us to see that "talk is cheap." John Calvin, reflecting on this text says, "We should learn not to make wild and irresponsible claims to be Christ's disciples, without taking any thought for the cross and the hardships." Anyone can claim to be a follower of Jesus. Anyone can make bold statements.

I've learned over the years not to be so convinced by convincing statements. Now I try not to be pessimistic, but I have found it to be true that people who are "over-the-top" in their statements are usually covering up spiritual shallowness. I have found that visitors who are overly generous in their praise are usually the first to leave. I have found that pre-marital counseling couples who say "we never fight" or "I could never commit adultery" are usually in big trouble.

The measurement of a disciple is not what you say, what you project, or your excitement. Emotions are fickle, excitement fades, and affections rise and fall. The real test of discipleship is not what you say, but rather two things: 1) Do you know who Jesus is? and 2) will you follow him when life gets tough? Following most rabbis meant living with the teacher, being with him, and enjoying safety, stability, and protection. The hasty scholar thought Jesus was

just another rabbi, and he tried to sign up. Following Jesus isn't like that; it involves sacrifice, risk, and difficulty. But if you know him – really know him – it is worth it.

Reluctant Follower: "Don't Look Back"

We meet a second person in 8:21. He is a reluctant follower. Notice that he is described as a "disciple" which means that he had already spent some time with Jesus. We are not told how long his relationship with Jesus was. Matthew only tells us what he says (v 21), "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." What is he asking to do?

At first this seems like a reasonable request, doesn't it? I mean it seems like the right priority for a follower of Jesus, doesn't it? The problem is that when we hear "go and bury my father" we think that his father must have just died. However that is not what is going on here.

First, the phrase "go and bury my father" in Jesus' day meant to fulfill his responsibilities for the remainder of his father's lifetime. So this disciple is not asking to bury his father; he is asking to return home for an indefinite period of time.² The second thing that you have to see is the emphasis on the word "first." The addition of that word makes the problem apparent. The disciple wanted to re-order his life after he had decided to be a disciple of Jesus. He became a follower of Jesus, but at some point began regretting his decision. It was proving costly, and this disciple wanted to go back.

Now the tension here should be obvious. Family and even caring for your parents is certainly not a bad thing. The problem is not family relations; the problem here is priorities. And that is why Jesus says, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." Jesus calls for an allegiance that takes greater priority than the most basic relationships in life.

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 (Matt 10:37).

"Leave the dead to bury their dead" is another remarkable statement because of the fact that Jesus calls the alive family members "dead." He is using metaphoric language to describe the spiritual condition of what and who the disciples have left behind. The Bible frequently refers to the difference between those who have found Jesus and those who have not as the difference between death and life:

And this is the testimony: that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life (1 John 5:11-12).

² R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew – NICNT, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 329.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins, in which you once walked, following the course of this world...even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:1-2, 5-6).

Jesus sets up the contrast very clearly: the people who you want to go back to are dead. He is calling this reluctant disciple to shore up his commitment to follow by realizing that supreme value of what is offered in being a disciple – even if it means leaving family.

Jesus is helping this wavering disciple to realize the story behind what he sees in this life. He wants him to see life through a different lens. Family is not bad. But part of the cost of following Jesus means that someone more basic and important than even Father or Mother has taken over your life.

Jesus is calling him to not look back. There are two really important applications that I'd like to make from this:

1. Some of you, when it comes to family, have paid dearly by committing your life to Jesus. Your parents don't understand; you can't even talk about the most important thing in your life. Every holiday, every birthday, every family gathering you are the odd-ball. It almost feels like you are an alien. Everything seems so backwards, awkward, and tense. And I just want you to know that just after Jesus said "Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me..." he said "whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt 13:37-38). In other words, the pain of family difficulties is **your cross**. And I want you to not look back.
2. There are others who might be tempted to wonder what your life would be like if you could go back to the "former you." You hear about what your co-workers did on the weekend, and it brings back memories. You see your neighbor getting his newspaper at 10:00am on Sunday in his "I-give-up-clothes," and you wonder what that it is like to sleep in on Sundays. You connect with old friends who are making more money, they seem so happy, and they are absolutely God-less. And for a split moment, you entertain the thought: "I wonder what it would be like to..." DON'T GO THERE! Don't be a reluctant disciple. Remind your heart: they are the walking dead.

Being a disciple of Jesus means that you see the world through this lens. You've come to know Jesus; you see the world differently, and you don't look back.

Fearful Followers: "Learn to Trust"

The final story is designed to highlight the importance of disciples learning to trust. It is one of the most basic and important lessons for followers of Jesus. You could think of it as

Discipleship 101. In fact, this entire story could really be seen as a metaphor for discipleship: storms will come; learn to trust.

Verse 23 indicates that Jesus got into a boat and his disciples joined him. While they were on the Sea of Galilee a great storm began and the boat was being swamped with water. And throughout this harrowing experience Jesus is asleep. The disciples begin to panic and they said (v 25), "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." The phrase is three Greek words said almost in staccato form – Save, Lord, Dying!

Jesus wakes up and says (v 26), "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Jesus actually calls them little-faith-ones. Their fear had gotten the best of them, and they started to panic. Mark it down: the presence of fear without faith creates panic. Now not all fear is bad, and not all fear is directly opposed to faith. There can be real God-centered faith in the midst of fear. Jesus is chiding them for excessive fear that is triumphing over faith leading to panic.

Jesus rebukes two things: the disciples fear and the storm that surfaced it. Imagine what that moment must have been like. As the boat is reeling back and forth, as the winds are howling, Jesus stands up and rebukes the wind and sea. Instantly it is over. Everything is calm.

Verse 27 captures the moment so well: "And the men marveled saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?" That's a great question because it is the essence of the lesson from this story: what sort of man is he?

The disciples didn't fully understand who Jesus really is. The lesson is so clear: knowing Jesus = trusting Jesus. That is what it means to be a disciple, a follower. You know Jesus and you trust Jesus.

For those of you who are still trying to figure out the meaning of Christianity, it comes down to this. The forgiveness of your sins and a right relationship with your Creator only comes to those who know who Jesus is and to those who trust him. Salvation (the forgiveness of your sins) only comes to those who put their trust in Jesus – to those who take Christ's sacrifice as their own. Trusting Jesus is how you become a follower of Jesus, and it is how you live as a follower of Jesus.

Do you find it interesting that in the midst of a storm Jesus is sleeping while his disciples are panicking? I do. And yet it is also very instructive. "One can learn from the story...that in danger disciples should sometimes walk into their room, lie down, and go to sleep. At times, sleep with confidence pleases Jesus more than prayer with fear."³

³ Brunner, 399.

I have often wondered why God made sleep a necessity for humans. I don't like to sleep, and if I could I wouldn't. However, I need sleep. I cannot make it without a good dose of it every day. And I have learned that sleep is worship. There are many times when I go to bed with so many things unresolved – no solutions to a problem at church, a sermon barely started, a marital conflict not fully resolved, a burden on my heart that won't go away. Sometimes the most worshipful that I've done all day is to lay my head on the pillow and say, "Jesus, I'm going to bed tonight believing that you are going to help me tomorrow. I trust you."

Now there have been other moments when I've stayed up late, trying to discover a solution, finding a way to work harder, and the real issue in play at this moment is my unwillingness to trust. I'm not out at sea. There are no waves and no wind. But make no mistake about it, I'm saying, "Save, Lord, Sermon!" "Save, Lord, Church People!" "Save, Lord, Teenagers!" "Save, Lord, Imperfect Marriage!"

While I'm sure that the Lord is pleased with my weak prayer, I wonder if simple trust is really what he is looking for. There are times when I just need to be reminded of what the Bible says:

"the voice of the Lord is over the waters; the glory of God thunders, the Lord over many waters...the Lord sits enthroned over the flood...May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless his people with peace" (Ps 29:3,10-11).

There are many, many times when I just need to be reminded that central to being a disciple of Jesus is learning to trust. Even the boat is rocking and the storm is fierce, I can trust that Jesus is in control and he is worthy of my trust.

Not everyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus really is. There are some who are full of passion but they quit when it gets tough. There are others who sign up, only to keep looking back.

True discipleship is realizing that:

Talk is cheap – don't be hasty

Don't look back – don't be reluctant

Learn to trust – don't be filled with eclipsing fear

May God help us to learn how to be full-throttle followers of Jesus.

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