

The Priority of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. And I encourage you to have open the Bibles again at page 789, 789, to Matthew chapter 8. We're in a sermon series that we began last week on Matthew 8 onwards for a few weeks.

And let's pray now. God, our Father, thank you for your word about your Son. And we pray that this word will be written in our hearts so that we may love and obey him and follow him for the rest of our lives.

Amen. When the bandwagon passes by, it's very tempting to jump on board. And who wouldn't? After all, they had just seen this man, Jesus of Nazareth, cleanse a leper, something that was virtually unheard of.

They had seen him heal a centurion's servant simply by speaking from a distance. He didn't even go to him or touch him. And they'd seen him or heard about him healing Peter's mother-in-law of a fever which instantly left her.

Not simply coincidental that a few days later she got better, but instantly and immediately each of these healings occurred. Not to mention, of course, that they'd heard him speak that famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount on the top of the mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

[1 : 19] Great crowds had heard him preach. Great crowds had followed him down the hill. Great crowds had been gathered around as he did those various healings. More people were brought to him at the end of that day, the Sabbath day after sunset, for them to be healed.

And he cast out demons out of many as well. Huge crowds amazed at this man, Jesus of Nazareth. And it seems like a pretty good idea to follow him. He seems to have some power that nobody else does, some authority in his teaching that nobody else does.

People were amazed at both his healing and his teaching. So why not jump on the Jesus bandwagon? I mean, even a scribe wants to do that. Verse 19, teacher.

The scribe says, normally the scribes themselves were regarded as teachers. I will follow you wherever you go. Now, normally the scribes are actually the opponents of Jesus, although not all of them.

And here is a scribe, a teacher, a Jewish leader wanting to follow Jesus wherever you go. He's about to leave the area. He's about to get in a boat and go on to the lake at the beginning of verse 18.

[2 : 24] Well, this Jesus looks pretty impressive and we can well understand why people want to follow him. The power of healing, the power of teaching, etc. This Jesus seems to be worth following.

Jesus' reply to this man, this scribe, is succinct and sharp about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. He says to him in verse 20, Jesus is making a comparison here.

Foxes and birds are God's creatures, but nowhere near as important as people whom God has made. And none more so important than the Son of Man. Jesus' way of describing himself so often in the scriptures.

A way that somehow tries to put down his divinity, at least publicly, but nonetheless is a title from the Old Testament that Jesus uses because of his special relationship with Almighty God.

Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Now, at first sight, that looks a little bit cryptic. This man says, well, I'm going to follow you wherever you go.

[3 : 47] And then this man, Jesus, just says, well, foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests and the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. And you might well imagine the scribe saying, oh, what does that mean?

Jesus is implying here that if you want to follow me, then you need to be prepared as I am not to have anywhere to lay my head.

Not that Jesus says he never sleeps. I mean, after all, in the next paragraph, he's sleeping in the boat with his head presumably laid down on a cushion or a boat or something. It's not that Jesus never sleeps.

It doesn't mean that he never had somewhere to lay down his head. He stayed for much of his adult life in Peter's mother-in-law's house. But he's saying something here about priorities that is important for any who want to be a follower of Jesus.

Jesus is, in effect, saying here what we read in other places, that he belongs, in a sense, in heaven. And his time on earth is like camping, in a sense.

[4 : 52] It's a temporary time. He's traveling light. His roots are in heaven. That's where he belongs. And for those who follow him, it's to be the same priority.

That is, we don't belong here. We don't live here permanently. Our citizenship is in heaven, as Paul says to the Philippians. On earth, those who follow Jesus are aliens and strangers, as Peter says in his first letter, for example.

What Jesus is saying here to this scribe, he says to others as well, and to us. Following Jesus is not all beer and skittles. It's not all fun and ease.

It's not just a whiz-bang show of miracle healing after miracle healing, full of comfort and palatial splendor. We belong not on this earth.

Here we are aliens and strangers. That idea, though these words are well known, is very foreign from the way we Western Christians so often think of our Christian lives and faith.

[6 : 05] Here we live in the lap of luxury, with comfortable beds and pillows mostly. Not that Jesus is saying, of course, it's wrong to buy a bed or wrong to buy a pillow.

But we live in luxurious houses, most of us, if not all of us, really, by world comparison. We set up our homes as if this is where we live forever.

Our homes become our palaces and our castles. Our world, our thinking, often revolves around our secure and comfortable living.

So we want the latest gadget, the latest bit of plasma, more remotes. We hate to miss the latest home improvement. And we invest more than our savings, both metaphorically and literally, into our houses, into our places of living, into our comfort.

So we often extend it, not just that it's our home where we live Monday to Friday, but our holiday homes as well. And we think it catastrophic when the mortgage rates inch a little bit higher.

[7 : 17] Jesus is not advocating poverty, nor is he advocating homelessness. But he is sharply and provocatively advocating an attitude to this world, our homes, and our comfort that we don't often practice ourselves.

He is saying that if you want to follow me, your thinking about this world, comfort, security, luxury, will need to change.

If you want to follow me, that will come at a cost. And yet so often we in the West are duped into prosperity gospel mentalities, even if overtly we shun the prosperity gospel.

So we say how blessed we are with our homes and our comforts and our wealth. We fit in our Christian lives so long as it doesn't give us too much discomfort or cause us too much inconvenience.

I think these words of Jesus here address one of the blindest spots that we Western wealthy Christians have. In Australia, at least, buying a home is one of our greatest idolatries.

[8 : 41] Not that having a home or owning a home is bad. Not that it in itself is a sin. Often very good things become idols when we lift them up to the place that our life revolves around.

And so it is so often with homes and luxurious and secure living. But luxurious living and nice homes and comfortable places to sleep and so on can be a danger and a spiritual compromise. We imbibe so much of our world's culture and its values without question. We think that this is just normal and right. And so our homes become places where our roots grow deep.

This life is what matters above all. We live for this world instead of in this world for the heavenly world to which we belong. We live as though this is all there is.

And we've been conned by our world's values when we do that. Jesus is telling us here that following him is costly.

[9 : 50] We know that for people far away. We know that it's costly for them and we thank God that we have the blessing of living here different from them.

We know that it's costly in Nigeria. I met an Anglican minister there some years ago when I was teaching. And in the riots in northern Nigeria back in about 99, his teenage 16-year-old roughly son was confronted by a gang of Muslim youths.

16 years old. They had machetes. They surrounded him and said, Renounce your Christian faith or we will kill you.

16-year-old. And he said, I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And they killed him. His father was and still is an Anglican minister.

We know it's costly over there far away to be a Christian. I've met many Chin and Karen Burmese people who suffer not simply because they live in Burma like all Burmese suffer so atrociously under such an appalling regime.

[10 : 58] But doubly so because they're Christian. But doubly so because they're Christian.

Persecuted in all sorts of different ways. Economically deprived because they're Christian. I've met Indian Christians who've lost possessions and houses because simply they're Christian.

And in various states in India they are attacked because they're Christian. Oh yes, we know that over there far away there is a cost and we thank God that we don't live like that in those places.

But what about us? What is the cost for us of being Christian here in Australia? It might be the cost of tithing as we ought for gospel purposes.

Or perhaps we don't because we don't like to encroach upon our luxury and the latest gadgets. It might be the cost of making church attendance our number one priority.

So that we're disciplined with Saturday nights and what we do and don't do. So that we have the energy and attention to give to the people of God on a Sunday. It might be the cost of buying less.

[12 : 07] Buying fewer gadgets and fewer upgrades. So that we can give more for the sake of other Christians and gospel ministry here and in other places.

Maybe it will be a cost of going overseas to serve. In difficult places. Losing superannuation. Losing home comforts. Risking health. Like some of our missionaries.

Maybe there could be a cost for those who are older. My mother who's in her 70s is about to go for two and a half months on a short term missionary service to Cairo. To look after the guest house at the Anglican Cathedral there.

After the person who was doing that job was involved in a serious car accident. I don't think she'll find it very easy. I think she realises that. But she's prepared to go as part of Christian service.

I'm very proud of her. Wonder how many of us would do something like that. Many of us aren't even prepared to give up a favourite TV program to come to a monthly prayer meeting or to join a Bible study group.

[13 : 11] Would we give up our work promotion with more pay? Because we don't want to run the risk of longer hours away from Christian activity and Christian service. I'm not convinced that we really experience and practice what Jesus demands in these words to describe.

Foxes have holes. Birds of the air have nests. What the scribe did we're not told.

That's not the point. The point is will we follow Jesus even if it demands high cost? Well another man approaches Jesus another of his then followers and says Lord first let me go and bury my father.

Seems a reasonable request. It may be that the father's already died and this is an immediate thing for him to do. It could be that the language is about my father is old and dying so let me wait for him to die and then bury him and then I'll come and follow you.

Jesus' response seems rather harsh and unloving. Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. The spiritually dead bury the physically dead.

[14 : 34] It seems as though Jesus is very uncaring in those words. I don't think he's prohibiting us from attending funerals. Jesus is not prohibiting us from loving and caring for our parents.

I mean that injunction is reinforced a number of times in the New Testament. But Jesus is using deliberately provocative words in an idiomatic way to stress a contrast in order to show a higher priority.

Follow me above all. Back in the Old Testament Elisha asked to follow Elijah the prophet. And Elisha wanted to go first and say goodbye to his mother and father and Elijah said by all means go.

In contrast to that Jesus is saying I'm even more important than Elijah and following me takes a higher priority and a greater urgency than even following the great Elijah of the Old Testament. Jesus' strong language here in fact addresses another of the idols of our society. His response to the scribe addressed our idolatry about homes and security and comfort.

[15 : 51] Here he addresses our idolatry of family. Of course family's good and parents are good and children are good. We're encouraged to love our families and serve them and so on.

But again good things lifted up into the wrong place around which our whole lives revolve become our gods and our idols. And family is a key one in our society these days.

Nothing is more important than following Jesus even at the cost of family. And again we know that far away these things happen.

A Christian is converted from a Muslim background in Iran or Egypt or somewhere like that and their lives may well be under threat. Their parents renounce them. The same if they come from a Jewish family.

Sometimes even from Buddhist families. We know that over there far away across the ocean these things happen. Thank God it doesn't apply here. But what about us?

[16 : 51] Home and family are two great idols of the 21st century in Western Christianity. Christianity. How often our families come first above our Christian discipleship and following. How often we let our children or our parents or family occasions intrude upon or compromise our church attendance, our church involvement or whatever it is.

I'm not saying of course renounce our families and have nothing to do with them. Not at all. But sometimes our families control us far more than God does.

We shower on our kids every wealth and blessing and gift and gadget. Of course we don't want to deprive our children. But sometimes our priorities look a little bit askew with Christian glasses on. Again we're not told this man's response. We don't know whether he followed him or whether he went and buried his father. But again that doesn't matter because what matters is our response. Do we place following Jesus as the number one priority in our life? Above family, above home, security and comfort. Jesus' words are deliberately provocative.

[18 : 04] They are meant to make us uncomfortable. And if you're not squirming in your seats a little bit as I have done this week then you're either ignoring this word or you're following Jesus as you ought.

It looks easy to jump on the bandwagon of Jesus at the middle point of chapter eight. The teaching, the healing, the wisdom, the crowds, the adulation, the popularity, the excitement.

Why not jump on board? It's sure to be an exciting and popular ride. And Jesus curbs all of that by these provocative demands.

The son of man has nowhere to lay his head. Follow me and let the dead bury the dead. Following Jesus comes at a cost.

Even for us in the western world. Or it should. A cost though perhaps few of us are fully prepared to make. Ourselves included.

[19 : 09] Is it worth the cost? Well of course it is. That's indeed why these words of discipleship are embedded with stunning teaching and miracles of Jesus to make it clear to us that following Jesus is worth every cost that we'll ever make even if it costs us our life.

He's just healed various people and taught profound things in the Sermon on the Mount. And now he gets in a boat to leave the northwest part of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum to go across to the other side of the boat.

Some of his disciples do follow him. We don't know if the scribe or the man in verse 21 are amongst that number or not. And as we know the windstorm arose on the sea so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves.

Jesus remains asleep. And they went and woke him up with some urgency and some fear. Lord save us we're perishing and we know that some of Jesus' disciples were experienced fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

There are fishing boats there all the time even these days it is rich with fish this freshwater lake about the size of Lake Ilden although not quite a sort of like all the tentacles of Lake Ilden it's a bit more compact than that.

[20 : 20] Hundreds of feet below sea level the mixture of air currents over the Golan Heights and up from the Jordan Valley sometimes creates sudden stormy weather even today.

But Jesus' words to them simply were why are you afraid? You have little faith. Well we're afraid because this storm is about to kill us. Do you really think that God would allow a storm to drown the Son of Man?

See they don't fully appreciate who Jesus is and what he's on about. And again like we saw last week it's not little faith as in a measure of faith it's more about the quantity of faith or the quality of faith rather where that faith is directed to.

That is they don't fully understand the nature power and purpose of Jesus yet. Later on in Matthew's gospel again you get the language of you of little faith you need faith like a mustard seed. A mustard seed is the smallest sort of thing. So the saying about little faith is not about quantity as though somehow we need to just top it up a bit but rather about where our faith is focused on the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 29] And he got up and he rebuked the winds and the sea and there was a dead calm. The sense of that is immediately. Do you know how long it takes for rough waves on water to calm down?

Years ago I was on holidays in Wales when I used to live in England and I went with a friend for a week and we passed a lake to get to the house that we were staying in. And this was a beautiful lake and every now and again we caught glimpses of wonderful reflections and one day they were perfect and we pulled the car over and stopped and my friend's berserk on photography.

So he gets out of the car while I start reading a book and just as he was setting up to take this photograph a rowboat went across and the ripples destroyed the lake.

So he said I will wait. An hour later the lake was calm and he took the photograph. That was worth waiting an hour.

But when you've got ripples in water it doesn't instantly become calm when the wind stops. But like we saw last week with the healings.

[22 : 40] Fever gone, bingo, she gets up to serve. The man who's a leper, bingo, he's healed. All those skin conditions, instantly healed. Not taking a week or two weeks.

So too here. An instant healing. This is not just coincidence. I mean to be honest if you're in a stormy wind on a boat and you every time just kept saying peace be still, eventually you'll coincide with the wind stopping.

But don't be fooled that you're miraculously powerful. But for Jesus it wasn't a coincidence because it was instantly calm. You have little faith.

faith. And they say at the end, what sort of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey him? Strong discipleship flows from strong faith in a strong Jesus.

And if we doubt his provision and his power and his protection then we will set up alternative idols of homes and family and other things. But when we have conviction about the power, the goodness, the grace, the protection that Jesus offers, the guarantee of heaven and heavenly mansions there, etc.

[23 : 56] Then such strong faith will lead to strong and costly discipleship. Having arrived on the other side of the lake in Gentile territory, away from Herod Antipas, now in what was called the Decapolis, the area of the Gadarenes, Jesus arrives.

This is more pagan territory. There'd be Jews who lived around there but not to the same extent as back on the other side where Capernaum was, where Jesus has come from. And here there are two men possessed by demons, demoniacs, they're called here.

So fierce were they that no one could pass by them. And they suddenly shouted to Jesus, what have you to do with us, son of God? They know who Jesus is. The demons know. Have you come here to torment us before the time?

Before what time? Before the end time, the judgment. The day that the book of Revelation and some bits of the Old Testament and apocryphal books describe of the end of evil spirits and so on, on the day of God's judgment.

This is a bit early they're saying, and have you come here, here to earth or here to this pagan territory before time to torment us? Jesus makes no response, it seems.

[25 : 15] A large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. You might expect that in pagan territory, you wouldn't see it in Jewish territory, where pigs are so unclean.

The demons begged him, if you cast us out, and they know his power to do it, clearly from those words, send us into the herd of swine. And Jesus' words simply, go.

There's no negotiation, there's no conversation, when Jesus deals with evil spirits, it's a command, a one-word command, go. And they came out and entered the swine, obedient to Jesus. And suddenly the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water. My presumption is you wouldn't have seen the evil spirits because they're invisible moving into the swine, but when the swine go rushing down into the water, in a sense it's a demonstration of the end of the evil spirits and a demonstration of the exorcism of the spirits from the two men. It's clear that Jesus has performed something powerful here. Well, the swine herds, now no longer demoniacs, ran off, and on going into the town they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniac.

[26 : 29] Sorry, the swine herds tell what's happened to their swine about the men who were demoniacs, and the whole town comes out to rejoice and celebrate that these men have been exercised from their spirits, and they throw a feast, and they rejoice and sing hymns and psalms and spiritual songs to Jesus.

No, not at all. They tell Jesus to go away. Their swine are more important to them than the saviour. Their pigs are more important than people.

Again, their values, not quite right. Jesus is looking for followers. He's looking for people to be his disciples. not as a respectable little add-on to a comfortable and wealthy lifestyle, but rather as a number one priority for our lives.

Above our homes, our comforts, our securities, above our families, above our livelihoods, at whatever it costs. But this powerful Jesus who heals, this powerful Jesus who casts out demons, this wise Jesus who teaches so profoundly in the Sermon on the Mount, this one who calms even the winds and the waves, he is worth following with your life, whatever the cost.

he I thought. Let's do it. Let's do it.