

Avoiding Anaemic Discipleship

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[0 : 00] Well, I want to begin this Bible talk today by talking to you about a relatively common ailment. My wife Heather suffers from bouts of it. It's a blood-related disease and it's called anemia.

And I know and realise that anemia can be a debilitating condition and I don't want to belittle that for a moment. However, in English usage, the term anemia, and particularly anemic, has been used to speak about a slightly different complaint.

Not a blood disease, no, more a sort of character trait or disposition, a personality description it can even be used for. And here, when people use it like this, it means, you know, vapoured, bland, inadequate, insipid, lacking colour, half-hearted, lifeless, lacklustre, powerless, lame, all of those sorts of things.

Now, I started this particular way this morning in order to use this term anemic. You see, I think anemic is a term that may very well be used of some of the disciples of Jesus that we're going to meet today in this passage.

So listen in and open your Bibles with me because I'm hoping that as we explore this passage, not only might you see what anemic discipleship looks like, but you might find a way to avoid it.

[1 : 22] Because I think there are hints in this passage as to how to do so. So let's go into the passage, open your Bibles there at Matthew chapter 8. Now, first, let me set the context. Earlier this year, we went through the whole of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 and 7.

And we saw Jesus beginning to set standards of the kingdom. And he was saying, these are the ethics, these are the values that characterise those who will sign up for the kingdom that I'm speaking about.

By God's grace, he said, these will be the norms of the disciples of the kingdom. This is what the disciples of Jesus will do. And he said all sorts of things like they will do their religious devotions privately, not publicly.

They will put the righteousness of the kingdom first, not last. They will avoid judgmentalism as they deal with people. They'll take a narrow way rather than the broad way. Their finances will reflect kingdom values.

The disciples of Jesus will produce and the members of the kingdom will produce good fruit. They will build their lives on solid rock and they'll love God wholeheartedly and they'll love neighbours themselves. That's just a sampling of what's in the Sermon on the Mount.

[2 : 32] That is the setting for chapter 8, which is where we are today. Last week, we noticed there are three stories of disciples encountering Jesus. Central to them is the story of the centurion, which is in verses 5 to 13.

And Jesus highlights the centurion and characterises this particular Roman man as a great example of great faith. It's the sort of faith, he says, that should characterise the people of God in Israel, but doesn't.

So he points out that this is an example of true faith. And that sort of faith forms the backdrop for our story today or our verses today. Because as Jesus makes clear, and as we'll see, the faith of the centurion is somewhat lacking amongst some of those who are saying they want to sign up and follow Jesus.

So let's explore this. There's one more thing, though, to add before we do. Have a look at verse 18 in chapter 8. We're told that a crowd surrounds Jesus.

He therefore seeks perhaps to escape them to cross over to the other side of the lake in verses 18 to 22. And then he actually does so in 23 to 27.

[3 : 48] And so in each section of our passage today, we have notes about followers and following. And that binds them together. So that's the broad context. Let's look at the detail.

Verses 18 to 22 is our first section. Now, what happens here is we meet two would-be disciples of Jesus. Jesus speaks of the second man as another disciple.

Can you see that in verse 21? That means that the first one is also a would-be disciple. So we've got two would-be disciples. Now, in Matthew's gospel, when he uses the term disciple, he does not necessarily mean a fully signed up disciple.

It's someone aspiring often to be a disciple, thinking about being a disciple. And this becomes obvious in the two stories of these two men. Let's look at each one. Look at verse 19. There we meet this first would-be disciple.

He's a teacher of the law. That is, he's a religious functionary. He's a scribe within Israel. And he comes to Jesus and he says, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.

[4 : 55] And in verse 20, Jesus responds. And let me tell you, it's not a positive response. The response of Jesus clearly implies that he doesn't take a positive view of the declaration of this teacher of the law.

Because he says, Foxes have dens, Birds of the air have nests, But the Son of Man, He has no place to lay his head. Now, let's just explore what's going on here, you see.

First, did you notice the label he uses of himself? He calls himself the Son of Man. And that's the very first time in Matthew's Gospel that he's used this term of himself.

Now, if you're an Old Testament person, you'd understand where this term comes from. It comes from Daniel chapter 7. And in Daniel 7, it refers to an exalted figure who comes before God, the Ancient of Days.

And the Ancient of Days gives him authority and glory and sovereign power. And he tells him he can rule over the nations of the world. That is, he gives him the nations of the world.

[5 : 56] He is to be ruler of an everlasting kingdom which will never be destroyed. Now, I wonder if you can see the irony in what Jesus says in this verse. You see, he's going to be ruler over all nations and peoples.

He's going to be ruler of an everlasting kingdom, never to be destroyed. And then, in the same breath, as calling himself the exalted Son of Man, he speaks of himself as a homeless, wandering, itinerant preacher.

Almost as a nobody. The lot of God's exalted ruler is therefore one of deprivation. And the disciple is not to be above their master. Therefore, true discipleship will never be comfortable.

That's what Jesus is saying to this man. And it's not to be undertaken lightly. It is not to be entered into without you counting the cost for it. Friends, you see, this man here is full of enthusiasm that comes to Jesus, this teacher of the law.

And Jesus says no to superficial enthusiasm. He rebukes this man's lack of grip on the cost of being a disciple of his. He rebukes this disciple's quick promising, which is due to his ignorance about the cost of discipleship.

[7 : 04] You see, friends, Jesus wants, is truly after disciples and he's after true disciples. And true disciples count the cost. They understand the mission of Jesus, who Jesus is and what he's doing.

And they understand that lining up with him is about lining up with God's exalted saviour. But it's also lining up with his humble, itinerant, self-denying, homeless and bedless saviour who will end up on a cross.

Friends, I think many of us like this would-be disciple. And perhaps you might identify with him. We sign up quickly and openly. But we don't take on board the cost.

And so our churches are filled with shallow but often pathetic disciples. Or, if I might say so, anemic disciples. And the damage is significant.

One 19th century English clergyman, well known, wrote many books. And a preacher said this. His name was J.C. Ryle. And he said, It's a very telling statement, isn't it, you see?

[8 : 21] People who sign up too readily. And then, really, they're plastic, anemic saints. Friends, Jesus is clear, you see. He says a categorical no to a superficial enthusiasm that is too quick in promising, too slow in counting the cost.

Christian discipleship is calculating and careful. It comes with a cross and hardship. If you are signing up for it, then be more careful than this man, is what I think this passage is saying to us. Be more careful than this man. Let's move from would-be disciple number one to would-be disciple number two. Verse 21. This man comes to Jesus a little more cautiously.

I wonder if he's been listening in. And he says, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Now, if you're a Jew, this is a noble request.

In a Jewish context, this is quite okay in some senses. After all, Joseph, well, he took time out of his service of Pharaoh to go and bury his dad.

[9 : 25] And the Ten Commandments say you've got to honour your father and mother in order to go, you'll live long in the land. However, in this man's mouth, it is an excuse for not immediately following Jesus.

It's a declaration that there's something other than Jesus that is going to take a higher precedence and priority than Jesus himself. But look at the response of Jesus. Verse 21.

Jesus told him, Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. Now, the dead here is a reference to those who are dead to the kingdom and its demands, I think.

It's very provocative, isn't it? There's undoubtedly some hyperbole here. But the hyperbole is necessary to make the point to this man. And the point is strong and it's bold.

Jesus is clear that his demands must not come second to even the most closest moral obligation and personal ties. You see, commitment to Jesus has got to be without reservation.

[10 : 28] Friends, can you see the difference between this man and the previous one? The first would-be disciple, superficially enthusiastic. He's quick in promising, slow in counting the cost.

And Jesus says a clear and categorical no to that sort of discipleship. But this would-be disciple, he's slightly different. I think he's perhaps a little more realistic about the cost.

Just doesn't want to pay it now. So, he's excessively cautious, in other words. He's too slow in performing. And Jesus declares a categorical no to him as well.

That is, too excessive caution. That is, too quick to put up excuses and too slow to actually get on with it. Friends, let me just self-confess a few things.

I'm 58 in a month or two's time. And peering through the lens at 60. And my eyesight is beginning to go. And my hearing specialists say my hearing is going as well.

[11 : 33] Well, the day I became a Christian seems some time ago now. Forty years, thereabouts. Some of the friends that signed up for the faith with me have fallen by the wayside in terms of discipleship.

They've become indistinguishable from the world around them. They've been consumed by legitimate but lesser interests. Taken up with family commitments and reasonable security concerns.

It's not all, many of them are going on firm in the faith. But let me tell you that churches are full of the former. At times, I, too, have felt my own discipleship somewhat insipid.

But I've been rebuked as I've prepared this passage for us this week. Friends, the call of Jesus is a call to follow. It is a call to cost. And it is a call to throw aside excessive caution.

You see, the Lord Jesus is the Son of Man. Who lays aside his right in order to take up a cross and die for people. And he is looking for disciples who know this and say, yeah, I'm signing up for that.

[12 : 41] I will follow in his footsteps. People of faith, in other words. And the people whose faith is tempered with a realistic understanding of the costs involved in following.

And let me tell you, those costs are not just for wide-eyed, 18-year-old enthusiasts I was when I signed up. They are given without reservation and they're paid for over a lifetime.

They are directed to me now as a 58-year-old. As equally as they were when I was an 18-year-old. They are costs that bring with them the glorious company of a suffering and exalted saviour.

Aren't they? With that background, let's turn to our second section for today. Verse 23. We've got a boat and some disciples. And these disciples have followed him.

That is, they've heard his preceding challenges, I presume. They've signed up. They're in the boat. They're with him. Let's see what happens. Verse 24. We're told there is a furious storm.

[13 : 45] Now that word here for furious storm is elsewhere used for upheavals in nature, such as earthquakes. You can see that in Matthew 24, verse 7. Same word.

This is not just a little squall. This is a storm of consequence. You know, even a natural disaster.

And the result appears to be that the waves are sweeping over the boat, apparently threatening to overwhelm it.

And among the disciples in the boat are some seasoned fishermen. And they appear to be frightened just as much as everyone else. But look at Jesus in the last part of 24.

What's he doing? He's asleep. There's all sorts of alternatives. Why? He could be very confident and secure in God's protection. Maybe his disciples are looking on at him and think there's something else.

They might think like the people in the Old Testament. That is that he's like God who forgets his people and who therefore needs to be urged to wake up. Psalm 35, 44.

[14:47] And it just goes on through the Psalms when people often think God needs to be woken up. Whatever it is, they thought Jesus should do something. Look at verse 25. They go and they wake him up.

And they say, Lord, save us. We're going to drown. They're like those people in Psalm 107 we read, crying out to the Lord. And he replies in verse 26.

He says, you of little faith, why are you so afraid? Then he got up and he rebuked the winds and the waves and it was completely calm. Intriguingly, the language of rebuke is similar to the language that Jesus will elsewhere use for casting out demons.

And he's rebuking the wind and the waves as though they're personified forces that need to be told to go back to their place. The actions of Jesus here are reminiscent of God's actions in the Old Testament.

You see there God stills the roaring of the seas and the waves. Psalm 65, verse 7. He rules over the surging seas. When waves mount up, he stills them.

[15:54] Psalm 89, verse 9. He does wonderful deeds in the deep. Psalm 107, the verse after we finish. Verse 23. When his people cry out to the Lord in their distress, he stills the storm to a whisper and hushes the waves of the sea.

Psalm 107, verse 29. Now, what's more surprising though, is that Jesus doesn't respond to their request for saving them. Rather, he rebukes them in relation to their faith.

You see, he doesn't condemn them for not having faith. No, the problem is they have little faith. I'm not sure he's talking about the quantity, you know, like a glass half full.

He's not saying, you know, you haven't got the full glass. No, I think he's saying the quality of your faith is little. The quality of their faith is small. Anyway, the response of the men outlined in verse 27. They are amazed. In Mark's gospel, they're terrified. They're amazed and they ask themselves, what kind of man is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.

[17:03] Now, already in Matthew, we've heard of amazement at Jesus. We've heard crowds are amazed at his teaching because he taught us one who had authority. In chapter 9, verse 8, we will hear that they're awed at his authority to heal congenital abnormalities.

In chapter 9, 23 and 12, 23, they'll be amazed at his power over demons. You see, the case for Jesus will gradually mount as Matthew's gospel goes on.

He is like God. He speaks like God. He acts like God. He controls demonic forces like God.

He even has control over the created order like God. What kind of man is this? Friends, what's this all about when you sort of summarize the passage?

In my view, central verses 25 and 26. The disciples' faith is little. Little in quality. It is faith in Jesus.

[18:02] But it's limited in its knowledge of Jesus. Of his association with God. It doesn't really know how close he is tied to God. And it's limited in its knowledge and understanding of his God-like power.

But there's something else here to notice. Did you notice it? You notice that the passage presents a choice for the disciples and therefore a choice for us. You see, there's two options with fear, isn't there?

And faith. Fear can chase out our faith, can't it? When you get scared of something, either in life or wherever, it can chase out our faith, can't it?

But there is another alternative. That is, faith can chase out fear, can't it? As we believe and trust in God, we no longer fear.

Now let me repeat it. Did you notice there's a choice for us as we listen? Fear can chase out our faith. Or faith can chase out our fear.

[19:04] And how far can faith chase out fear when it is faith in a true saviour who can save from the greatest fear? And that brings me to the two foci of this passage.

See, on the one hand, this passage is about discipleship. It's about following Jesus with true faith in him while we're in the midst of fear. That's one focus of this passage, about discipleship.

But there's another greater focus, in my view. And that focus is the person of Jesus. He's the hero of this story, isn't he? In the first part of the passage, we met the exalted son of man of Daniel 7, who will be given the kingdoms of the earth.

At the same time, he's a homeless, wandering, itinerant preacher. In the second part of our passage, we'll meet the Lord, called the Lord by his disciples, who is nature's master and can control it.

He speaks over creation like God. And like God's word, what he says comes to pass. Friends, with that said, let's return to where we started as a way of wrapping up.

[20 : 11] Do you remember that idea of anemic discipleship? Do you remember that anemic faith is vapored, bland, insipid, powerless, inadequate?

Well, we've seen some of it in this passage, haven't we? We've seen would-be disciples with superficial enthusiasm that's quick to promise but slow to come up with the goods.

And we've seen would-be disciples with excessive caution who were too slow to perform. And we've seen disciples like those in the boat with low quality or little faith.

Now, what's the antidote to such anemic faith and discipleship? Friends, the antidote is a full-blooded understanding of Jesus that results in following wherever he might take us.

A full-blooded understanding of Jesus is that he is God in the flesh. A full-blooded understanding of Jesus is that he is fully God.

[21 : 16] Fully God, able to control the created order. Fully God, fully able to control the spiritual order. Like God, able to speak the words that have effect and accomplish what he says.

At the same time, he is fully human. The Son of Man, who is not only the exalted Saviour of Daniel 7, but also who humbles himself to become a human, to wander the earth as a homeless itinerant who will finally end up hanging alone on a cross.

You see, faith in such a one as this will cause a person to leave everything and follow in his footsteps. For there's no other place to be, really, once you've met such a one.

It'll cause a person to take up their cross with him and follow. It will cause them to cry out to him for forgiveness and salvation. Friends, we need to be saved from anemic faith.

Faith in a stunted understanding of Jesus. But we also need to be saved from anemic discipleship. Which is a 21st century and 1st century problem.

[22 : 34] You see, we need to be saved from a discipleship that will not follow where he leads. At the cost that he requires us to pay. So let's ask God to preserve us from this sort of discipleship.

And to strengthen our faith and discipleship. Let's pray. Father, as we read these stories, we read so much of ourselves in them.

We see people of little faith. Or people without full-blooded discipleship and not willing to take it on. And we see the challenges that your son puts to us.

And Father, we pray that you would make us people who will follow Jesus as is required by him. And that would follow him wherever he goes.

And Father, thank you that with him is found the home that we long for. A home with you. And fellowship with you. And we know there's no other place to be.

[23 : 45] So Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.