

Pillow-less Discipleship

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, as we open your word this evening, we pray that we would see your son Jesus more clearly, and we would know him and love him more deeply.

And this we ask, and through the Holy Spirit, amen. Grab a seat. Well, good evening, everyone. Great to see you all.

Well, so two men, that was a short reading, wasn't it? Rebecca barely got up here and it was over. Two men come to see Jesus.

And the first man says, hey, Jesus, you're leaving town. I want to come with you. And the second man says, hey, Jesus, my dad just died. I'll catch up with you after the funeral.

And in each case, Jesus' response is direct, and it's punchy, and it's blunt, it's personal, and it's really a bit unnerving, isn't it?

[1 : 04] The fact is that these kind of punchy words, well, they get into the hands of a preacher like me, and they die a death by a thousand qualifications.

So I spend the next 20 plus minutes explaining away all the punchiness of what Jesus is saying here. I'm going to do my best not to do that. So let me be really straight with you.

Following Jesus is costly. Following Jesus must take first place. So count the cost and get your priorities in order.

And when you glimpse who Jesus is and what he's done for you, and the glorious reward that he gives you when you take his hand, then perhaps, perhaps you and I are ready to follow Jesus.

So our passage today is Matthew 8, 18 to 22. It's great if you have your Bibles open. Let's have a look at this passage together. Last week we resumed our sermon series in Matthew, and this little story is sandwiched between two sets of three miracles.

[2 : 22] Miracles that display Jesus' authority over sickness and nature and Satan and sin. And we see... And we see...

We see here in these five verses, it's like we're getting a shift, and we get a camera angle change, and we're getting a different glimpse on Jesus' authority from a different angle.

And this time, we're seeing Jesus' authority in relation to his disciples, in relation to people. And in each case, these two men come to him. We're not told what the outcome is.

Did you notice that? We're not told what they do, how they respond. And certainly this is deliberate. Why? Because you and I were left to ask ourselves, how would I respond to Jesus if he spoke to me like that?

How will I respond to Jesus tonight when I hear him saying to me, follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead? So let's have a closer look at these two men together.

[3 : 26] The first man comes to Jesus in verses 18 to 20. And here we discover that following Jesus is costly. Verse 18.

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. That's the other side of the lake, in case you're wondering. And a scribe came up to him and he said, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.

I want to name this man the hasty scholar. And he's a Jewish scribe, which means he's a religious academic. He knows his scriptures well. He's probably seen Jesus do miracles.

He's heard him teach. And he's ready to hitch his wagon to Jesus. But there are already, in just these few short words, a few warning signs.

That this scribe may not fully understand what discipleship is all about. So first, let's look at how the scribe speaks. Lord, pardon me, teacher.

[4 : 25] I will follow you wherever you go. So first he calls Jesus teacher or rabbi. Well, that's interesting because it's certainly a term of respect, but it does not have any greater status or

authority.

It does not acknowledge any greater status or authority for Jesus than any other Jewish teacher or rabbi. And it wasn't that long ago, just at the very end of chapter 7, that we heard when Jesus finished his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, this is how it was summarized.

The crowds were astonished at his teachings. He was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes. So all through Matthew's gospel, lots of people call him teacher.

We have Pharisees, Sadducees, tax collectors, Herodians. They're all kind of baddies in the book of Matthew, right? They all call him teacher. But none of his disciples call him teacher.

The only disciple who does is Judas. And that's not really somebody that the scribe wants to associate himself with. So that's the first warning sign. The second one is in the grammar of the sentence.

[5 : 32] The subject of that sentence is the scribe. Jesus, I will follow you. This is your lucky day. I've decided to be your disciple. And thirdly, it's the impressive use of the word wherever.

Wherever you go. It's a bold statement. Wherever you go. He doesn't even know where Jesus is going yet. But as we examine Jesus' response, we see that Jesus is going to pick up all of these warning signs and he's going to respond to them.

Particularly, he picks up the scribes bold wherever, wherever you go. And he's going to give it a little twist. He's going to give it a little twist to see if this man will count the cost.

So have a look with me at Jesus' response. Verse 20. And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. It's natural for every person, every creature, to have a home, to have a safe place to rest, to have a family, find security, but the Son of Man doesn't even have a pillow for his head.

Now, do you see the word nowhere there in the text? Jesus says, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. That's the little twist. There's a word play going on in the Greek. So, I'll follow you wherever you go.

[7 : 01] The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. It's the same kind of word there. Jesus is saying, followers of me, they are not guaranteed middle class security.

The scribe has not counted the true cost of becoming Jesus' disciple. And that's also why we find here, Jesus referring himself, for the first time in the Gospel of Matthew, as the Son of Man. It's a very important title. And he uses it deliberately here, for the first time, to challenge this would-be disciple, the scribe. And we need to just pause for a moment, and dig a little deeper into this title, the Son of Man.

So, permit me to say three things about the Son of Man. First of all, it's used 30 times in the Gospel of Matthew, and it's always on Jesus' lips. Nobody else uses it. Only Jesus.

Secondly, in those 30 times, I want you to just understand how it's used. It's not used in one way. So, seven times, it's used to refer to Jesus as a human figure, characterized by weakness.

[8 : 08] Kind of like in this passage here. And then ten times, it's used as a reference to suffering, as Jesus as the suffering and the dying one. And that leaves another 13 times where it refers to Jesus' future glory, as the judge and the ruler who comes at the end of the age.

And then thirdly, it comes from the Old Testament. It's a flashing light for those who know the Old Testament.

But what's interesting is it's not used the same way all through the Old Testament. So, in many cases, it's kind of a synonym for just a human being, a normal man. The Son of Man is just a regular guy.

But, there are a few choice instances, particularly in the book of Daniel that we studied in the summer, in chapter 7, verse 13, where the Son of Man appears as this mysterious, divine-like figure who comes before the Lord God, and the Lord God gives him dominion and the kingdom over all the earth to reign forever.

Kind of comes out of the blue. And so, when Jesus uses this title in Matthew, he likes to use it in different ways, sometimes to conceal his identity, sometimes to reveal his identity more clearly.

[9 : 31] And this man, for this man, he seems to hope that following Jesus will give him access to the same power and authority that Jesus displays. He seems to think that, well, he sees Jesus' strength, right, and his kind of unique God-like characteristics, this guy who can perform miracles, and he's an amazing teacher.

It's kind of like how I want to work with Aaron Roberts in the evening service. You know, you see somebody that you admire, you look up to, and you go, oh, I want to be his apprentice. So he can glimpse the potential for glory, but what he does not see is the humility of discipleship. He hasn't grasped that yet. And so Jesus tells him that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Jesus, the one who is going to rule over all, must first share with his disciples in all the insecurities and the weaknesses of the human condition.

So we see in Matthew, it's the Son of Man who will suffer at the hands of men in chapter 17. And he will be the one that's three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, chapter 12.

Following Jesus, friends, means following in his footsteps of weakness and humility and suffering, dying to ourselves and all my aspirations to human power and authority, to a certain lifestyle and leisure.

[11:00] Following Jesus may cost me the basic securities that I take for granted, but, but, I will be following the Son of Man, the one who in his death and resurrection conquered sin and Satan and death.

Yes, he went to the cross in humiliation and suffering, but when he rose, he rose in power and majesty to new life. That's the Son of Man that I'll be following.

Matthew 28 tells us right at the end of the book, When his disciples saw him after he rose again, they worshipped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples. All authority. That's the Jesus that we follow, the Lord of life in whom we have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

But what about the second man? Let's have a look at verses 21 and 22 where we learn that following Jesus must take first place. Another of the disciples said to him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

[12:12] We'll nickname this guy the hesitant son. And he speaks and he gives Jesus this lofty title. He says, Lord.

Well, that's an improvement on teacher. He seems to be getting it. And then he asks very politely a legitimate question you'd think. Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

If this man's father has just died, then of course he's got family obligations. He wants to let Jesus know he's going to catch up with him later after the funeral and after he's dealt with all the legal matters.

But then Jesus responds with this kind of shocking, harsh, almost cruel response. Jesus said to him, follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.

In case you're wondering, this is not something I would recommend saying to anybody who's going through grief. But since we've seen, I want you to think about this for a second.

[13:14] All through the gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus speak and act with tender compassion whenever he's encountering someone one on one. So I'm asking you to consider for a moment that this is in fact the most compassionate, the most loving thing that Jesus could say to this man.

And can that be true? Well, on first sight, it seems obvious that this man's father is dead, right? Why else would he need to go bury him? But there are many commentators now who are pointing out the fact that in the Middle Eastern Jewish context, it just doesn't make any sense.

Let me explain. So, if you're a Jew, you got your mom and dad, and honoring them is the most important thing you can do next to honoring the Lord God.

It's obedience to the fourth commandment. And there is no higher honor than laying them to rest in a respectful manner within 24 hours after they die. any of us who have lost a loved one can relate to this.

The feeling that you have, it's almost impossible to imagine that a man who has just lost his father is now in a crowd on the roadside talking to Jesus about discipleship. He'd be consumed with preparations for the funeral.

[14:38] So, if that's not what's going on here, what other option could there be? Well, consider for a moment that to bury your father is an idiom.

It's an Aramaic way of saying, Jesus, I have to take care of my father as long as he's alive. Some of you are in that position where you have a loved one that requires extra care right now.

Something like an aging parent or a spouse or a sibling who needs extra love and attention in this season of life. And in that case, this man is saying, Jesus, I need an indefinite postponement on

discipleship.

I can't follow you right now, but I'll catch up with you in a year or two as soon as this family priority is taken care of. And if this is the right way to interpret this exchange between Jesus and the hesitant son, then you need to know that it is both less harsh than we first thought and it is also more harsh. It is more harsh. So let me explain. Well, of course it's less harsh because it means that Jesus isn't saying you can't go to your father's funeral. But we need to be careful whenever we read something that's a little bit shocking or a little bit kind of offensive that we don't just automatically look for the less harsh interpretation.

[16:01] So that's not what I'm trying to do here because actually it is more harsh. His words pack even more of a punch. And the key to understanding that is to see how this son uses the word first.

Remember he says Lord let me first go and bury my father. So, yeah he gives Jesus the right title. He calls him Lord.

But immediately after that he makes it clear that his family is the first priority above everything else including Jesus. Jesus. And for a Jew the only person who could ever deserve to have more honor, more authority in your life than your father and mother would be the Lord God.

So in other words obedience to the fourth commandment was more important than anything else except for obedience to commandments one, two, and three. How does commandment one go? You shall have no other God before me.

And here Jesus is saying follow me. Make me your first priority. In effect he's saying honor me because I am God.

[17:15] I have the authority to call you to obedience because I came from the father. I speak the words of life to a dead world. And if he's right and I would encourage you not to take my word for it.

It's too important. If Jesus is right you need to actually read the gospel of Matthew and decide for yourself. Is he worthy of this authority that he's asking for?

Because if he's right then nothing else even wonderful things like family can take priority or a position above the place of Christ.

He is my first love. This son he hasn't fully grasped who Jesus is. He doesn't understand Jesus' divinity, his power and his authority.

And I want you to consider for a moment that if Jesus is calling this man to follow him as his first priority and his father is indeed dead, if that is the right way to read the text, his father has just died, I am certain that the very first thing that this man follows Jesus, the very first thing that Jesus will call him to do is go back and bury his father or care for his father.

[18:40] But he'll have his priorities in order when he does that. So as we close, I want you to remember how this story ends or how it doesn't end. how we do not get to see how either of these men respond.

Which begs the question for you and me, what is your first love? Who is your first love? What am I willing to sacrifice in order to follow Jesus?

You know it takes years of costly sacrifice to become a doctor, a journeyman in the trades humbly apprentices for five, six years before he's licensed.

Parenting is a lifelong commitment of sacrificial love. But too often, we treat discipleship as if it's a pass-fail course.

As if we would just say, I'm a Christian, I'm in. Weekly trip to evening service, check. Check. Discipleship done, check.

[19:52] So what does pillowless discipleship look like for St. John's evening service? Because in our culture of self-development and self-improvement and self-fulfillment, will you turn your gaze away from yourself long enough to gaze upon Jesus and see the one who loves you in the most costly way?

And when we get it wrong, like these two men seem to be doing, when we don't quite understand who Jesus is, he's not going to say, nope, can't be my disciple, too late for you.

You didn't get it on the first time. You're not good enough. No, he simply points us back to himself. Come to me, he says, look at me, see who I am and follow me.

Because there is such a great reward for those who enter in the arms of Jesus. True life, lasting life, is only found in him, in discipleship to him.

So follow, friends. Follow. Amen.