

Pillow-less Discipleship

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[0 : 0 0] Our Heavenly Father, we pray now as we turn to your word that you would show us the loveliness of Jesus Christ, his love for us, and how we are to love him. We pray this in his name. Amen.

If you would open your Bibles back to Matthew 8 that Alita read to us just a moment ago, Matthew 8 on page 813. Three, I've upgraded this week to a very safe stool.

I broke my foot a couple of weeks ago and I'm supposed to not bear any weight on it for another month. And Dan Gifford has promised to carry me out of the service on his shoulders.

I'm kidding. I also add my thanks to Dan's. It was quite a day last week. We had our 25th and 20th, which makes 45 years between us.

Dan and I have been at this church and it's felt like 43 and a half. That was a wonderful time. And thank you for the cards and the gifts. It was a great encouragement to us.

[1 : 1 0] And what a day Jesus had last week, eh? As we began in Matthew chapter 8 in the first 17 verses. You know, after his matchless teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 to 7, we have this day of all action where he heals a leper astonishingly, where he then heals a paralysed servant of a man from a distance with just a word.

Makes pronouncements about who's in the kingdom of heaven. And then he heals at the end of the evening. He heals Peter's mother-in-law. And then people line up out in the streets at night with the sick and the diseased and the demon-possessed.

And Jesus heals all of them. And I think the question that we ask as we go through these narratives is, what does that mean for us? You know, we know that Jesus delights in faith.

You know, we know that he delights in driving back evil. But how does faith work? What does it mean to respond to all this? And in the middle of chapters 8 and 9, with all these miracles going on, twice Matthew stops.

Twice he stops and points out what it means and how God wants us to respond. Twice he stops for us to consider the kindness and power of Jesus Christ.

[2 : 3 5] And so today we're going to stop. We're going to just look at these four verses, verses 18 to 22, where Jesus spells out what it is for us to have faith in him, what it means in practical details.

And the way he does it, it's very practical. It's not abstract. We see Jesus dealing with two individuals in a very different way. And Jesus always deals with us individually, which can take some getting used to as a Christian.

He always deals with us lovingly and wisely and kindly and perfectly. He knows what we need, not always what we want. He doesn't always give us the answers.

But he deals with me individually and he deals with you individually. And that's exactly what we find here. And I hope you were listening as the passage was read, because both of Jesus' responses are startling, even shocking.

He's just about to get into the boat to go over the other side of the lake. That's the point of verse 18, away from the crowd. In 19, the first man comes up.

[3 : 42] He's a scribe. He wants to follow Jesus. I'll promise you wherever you go, what does Jesus say to him? Verse 20, What does that mean?

And then a second man comes up. He's called a disciple and he says, I want to follow you. First, I've got to bury my father. And Jesus' response to him is, Follow me. Let the dead bury the dead.

What does that mean? And both of them come with genuine need. And both of them, Jesus wants both of them to have genuine faith.

And if I can just give you a hint. The first man has not really understood who Jesus is in terms of Jesus' humility. And the second man has not understood who Jesus is in terms of his majesty.

So let's look at those. Just going to look at these two men and see what it means for us today. Firstly, my first point is this. Real faith grasps Jesus' meekness.

[4 : 47] Verse 19, he is a scribe. That means he's got legal training. He is a professional. He's highly educated, smart, intelligent, with high status in that community.

A regarded leader. And he's polite. He comes up to Jesus and he calls Jesus teacher. He elevates Jesus to the same status that he's got. He's so impressed with Jesus' teaching.

So he's astonished, of course, by the authority and power and compassion and wisdom of Jesus. And it's completely understandable that he wants to follow Jesus. I will follow you wherever you go away to, he says.

I mean, don't you find when you just read the narratives of the gospel, it's just exciting watching Jesus at work. He wants to study Jesus at close quarters.

He says to him, wait, I want to be your disciple. I'm coming in the boat. And Jesus says to him, foxes have holes and birds of the air have their nests. But the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

[5 : 53] Do you not think that's a strange thing to say? I mean, isn't this what Jesus wants? Doesn't he want us to come to him and willingly say, I want to follow you and learn from you?

And there's nothing insincere about this man. Surely there's an extra space in the boat for him. And it's usually explained, this sentence of Jesus, it's usually explained in terms of Jesus spelling out the cost.

You know, that the scribe has not come to fully realise how difficult it's going to be to follow Jesus. And there's some truth to that. But there's a much deeper and more important thing going on here.

So let's look at it closely. Look actually at what Jesus says there in verse 20. Does Jesus say no to him? No.

Jesus is not saying no. He's not trying to drive this guy away. It's not a rebuke and it's not a rejection. In fact, if you look at it closely, Jesus doesn't say anything about what the scribe has to do.

[7 : 01] Jesus talks about himself. He reads this man better than the guy reads himself. And he gives him a dangerous invitation to enter more deeply into who Jesus is and why he came.

Foxes have holes. Birds of the air have nests. But the son of man has nowhere to lay his heads. Jesus is talking about himself and who he is and his own ministry.

So this is not a blanket statement saying it's wrong for Christians to own their own homes. It's you should feel guilty about having comfortable pillows.

That was a joke. That's not what he's saying. We know from this gospel, we know from the very day before that Jesus didn't always sleep out under the stars.

Sometimes, often, he stayed in people's homes. What is Jesus doing? He's pointing out the unimaginable distance that Jesus has come from the highest glory to the place of deepest humility to save his people from their sins.

[8 : 13] That Jesus has gone from the glory of countless angels and the worship and security of eternity in heaven to the vulnerability of the stable and the humiliation on the cross.

And to follow Jesus is not just getting into the boat and crossing over the other side of the lake. Jesus himself makes this very clear because this is the first time in Matthew's gospel he refers to himself as the son of man.

This is his favorite term to refer to himself. He uses it over 30 times in the gospel. And there's a double-sidedness to this idea of the son of man.

Mostly, it comes from the Old Testament. A vision of the final judgment. In fact, we never do this. Let's look this up. If you just flick back in your Bible to Daniel chapter 7 for a moment.

It's lovely to hear those pages going. Chapter 7 in the prophet Daniel, page 745.

[9 : 16] This is the day of judgment. And on the final judgment in verse 14, sorry, verse 13, there's one like the son of man comes to the ancient of days to God.

Verse 14, and to him was given, this is to the son of man, to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one which shall never be destroyed. So when Jesus refers to himself as the son of man, the biggest Old Testament background is that he is the coming judge.

He's the one whom God has appointed as the eternal ruler of the kingdom of heaven and all knees will bow before him and he will come in glory. But there's another side to the son of man.

Because when he came the first time, the son of man didn't come in glory. He came in weakness and humility and the fragility of a human baby.

[10 : 23] He comes so that he'll be enthroned on a cross, so that he'll be crowned with thorns. The one whose kingdom shall never pass away is murdered and spends three days in the belly of the earth.

So each time in this gospel, Jesus predicts his suffering and death, he says, it's the son of man who will suffer, the son of man who will be betrayed, the son of man who will go to death, to bring out the inconceivable double-sidedness of his ministry.

The contradiction of his glory and his humiliation. The combination of his majesty and his meekness, his power and his weakness.

His glory and his humility. And that's who Jesus is. And faith sees that's who Jesus is. All the scribe has seen so far is the power and authority of Jesus at work.

He hasn't seen really the suffering and humility and degradation of the cross. But he needs this to begin following Jesus. Because that's how we come to know the extent of God's love for us.

[11 : 37] I don't know if you've ever thought about this. If you remove either the extreme of Jesus' glory or his humility, Jesus' love evaporates.

If you collapse one or the other. So if it reduces power and glory to nothing or if you bring it down so that he's just a brave, suffering person who's misunderstood, maybe did some good miracles, it all ended in failure.

All Jesus becomes is a sort of a Nike tagline that he's believing in something strongly. But it doesn't change anything. It doesn't bring us to God. It has no power to give us eternal life.

It doesn't show us anything about the love of God, really. And if you take away God's weakness of the Son of God, and he's just the eternal Son of God, unacquainted, not vulnerable, unacquainted with the pull of temptation, he never really puts himself out there at risk.

We may worship him, but we can't really say that he loves us. But with all that glory and authority, he owed us nothing.

[12 : 43] Yet he came and gave us everything. And this is how he shows his love, that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. And Jesus doesn't want this man, he doesn't want us to follow him under false pretenses.

Do you know, the only other place in all four Gospels where Jesus is said to lay his head down is on the cross. He laid his head down and died.

And what this shows is just how valuable we are to him. And when we trust in Jesus, real faith draws us into close connection, the closest possible connection with Jesus Christ.

And the shape of his life becomes the shape of our life, the cross-shaped life. And brothers and sisters, because Jesus came into a world which is hostile to him, in weakness and in kindness, we serve Jesus in a world that continues to be hostile to Jesus.

So don't be surprised if you're suddenly treated as a defector. Don't be surprised if people tell evil lies about you on the sake of Jesus Christ.

[13 : 55] Rejoice and be glad. Because you share Jesus' suffering. That's all I'm going to say about the first person. Real faith grasps Jesus' meekness.

But the other part, the other side of this, and that's why they're beautifully balanced, I think, in this Gospel, for the second guy, is that real faith grasps Jesus' majesty. The second encounter is simple, but I think more searching.

Things start out very promisingly for the second guy. Verse 21, we read, Another of his disciples said to him, Let me first go and bury my father.

By the way, is your seat comfortable? Just checking on you. My seat's very uncomfortable. Another of his disciples said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

Such a reasonable request, don't you think? A right request? It's right from every point of view. I mean, this is one of the Ten Commandments from God, honouring your parents. And there's no secret scheme this guy's got, and he's cooking up.

[15 : 02] He simply wants to do the right thing by his family and go and bury his father. And he too is respectful, even orthodox. He's called a disciple, one of this wider group, loosely called disciples.

And he calls Jesus Lord. So he's pious and orthodox and moral, a family guy. He's the kind of guy you want on trustees at St. John's, right?

And Jesus says to him, Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead. And at first sight, it just seems so harsh and so cruel and so unloving.

I mean, is this the same Jesus who yesterday healed the leper? Who tomorrow is going to say, Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest? Who then goes on to weep over Jerusalem and die for us?

I mean, this guy's just lost his father for heaven's sake. What sort of grief care is this? And you know, the usual way of excusing Jesus and to try and soften these words is to imagine that this guy's father hasn't died yet and he's not even unwell and that this guy's just stalling to follow Jesus.

[16 : 20] He's wanting to keep his foot in both camps. But there's no evidence that the man's father hasn't died. And I think it's better to take it at face value and to let ourselves feel the shock of this.

How on earth does this help us follow Jesus? How does this practically work? I mean, is Jesus banning me from the sacred duty of burying my parents?

I mean, what's he asking of us here? And who does Jesus think he is to stick himself between me and my father? But look at it closely again.

Jesus is not rejecting this man. He doesn't say no and try and drive him away. Again, Jesus directs him to himself. He says, follow me. That's the first thing.

Follow me. That's the most important thing. And in the Greek, me is emphatic. Follow me. Follow me. This is the most important thing, more important than you can conceive.

[17 : 23] And as Jesus looks at this man, he reads him better than he reads himself and he sees where his heart is. And the telltale sign of where this guy's heart is, is that little word in verse 21, the word first.

Let me first go and bury my father. And then I'll be free. Then I'll be free to do as you wish, Jesus. In other words, this guy thinks it's right under circumstances to put Jesus second.

His faith and his following are qualified. He believes that following Jesus can be put off under certain circumstances. That Jesus is not the all-consuming, important thing in his life and that there's nothing more important than Jesus.

And that means he has not yet really understood who Jesus is because true faith, according to Jesus, means following him without reservations. It means loving Jesus above all things.

This is the true feeling of true faith. We love him. We think about Jesus with pleasure and joy.

[18 : 42] He's never far away from our minds or from our hearts or from our words. We know Jesus in our hearts is the only one worthy of our deepest desires and affection and love.

Of course, we feel our failures and our sins and our falls very deeply. It grieves us every time we remember that we've put him in second place because we want to please him. But we love him because he first loved us.

He came from glory to be God with us, gave himself to death on the cross. But true faith finds it impossible to be apathetic about Jesus.

So at the very surface level, it means you can't stall Jesus. You can't dither and make him wait. You know, I think I'll wait till I finish school, till I really commit myself to Jesus.

I'll wait until I'm earning a good wage before I give 10% of my income. I'll wait till I get my career started before I really nail my colours to the mast at work. I heard of a guy this week who was passed over promotion after promotion because he'd publicly established himself as a Christian.

[19 : 57] I'll wait to see my children out of the house before I really serve Jesus through my local community. I'll wait till the ski season is over before I commit myself to the church. Sorry.

There's always something pressing and needed and urgent to be done. But the challenge of Jesus here is, have you and I faced up to the reality and the challenge of who he is?

Because if you have, you'll want to put him first above all things. And I think what makes this so searching is that it's about the heart. Because we're so sneaky and so sinful in our hearts, we can look at this passage and make up all sorts of rules and not really love Christ above all things.

You know, this week at staff meeting, when we looked at this passage, we thought it'd be very good to come up with many illustrations of how we put Jesus second. Problem is, we could come up with 100 illustrations and 100 rules.

We could fulfil them all and we could all be completely self-righteous and our hearts a million miles from loving Jesus. It's way easier to make a list of rules and tick the boxes because there's no real faith involved in that.

[21 : 09] It's far more dangerous to say to Jesus, Jesus, I will love you above everything. I'm going to put you, Jesus, between me and every other priority that I have. Everything that I do, I'm going to do through you and for you.

That way, you see, we lose control. And just take this issue of the family. Jesus stands behind our commitments to the... Jesus has given you your family and given you to your family.

And later in this very gospel, he lashes the Pharisees for stepping between the commitment between children and their parents, calling them hypocrites, making void the word of God, whose worship of God is in vain.

He says, how dare you put yourself between these people and God's commandments? But that's exactly what Jesus does here. He takes priority over every other priority.

And he does it because having anything else as our first love brings death. And I think that's the point of this little proverb, leave the dead to bury their own dead.

[22 : 13] It's not a universal command. It's a proverb. It's a Jewish proverb. What he's saying is, if we don't set Jesus above every other love, our lives will be an endless cycle of the dead bearing the dead bearing the dead, bearing the dead.

It's only Christ who has come. And through Christ, we come into the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of life. To treasure him above all things is to find our lives.

And when we put him first, Christ then turns us to our families and to our neighbors and to our friends and to his world to serve and to love extravagantly, not for their own sake, but for his sake.

See, if we love anything above Jesus Christ or put anything ahead of him for its own sake, that thing will kill you.

And you'll likely kill it. You know, if you love your children, not for Christ's sake, but for their own sake, how do you know you're not manipulating them? Or how do you know when you haven't made your children your de facto saviors?

[23 : 22] You know, your parents live our lives vicariously. If you build your life on your children and rest your heart on your children, it's not good for them or for them.

But putting anything else, everything else into second place after Jesus raises everything to a unique dignity so that Christ himself has the right now to command us how to serve and how to love.

And these all become ways in which we love Jesus. And it makes sense because if Christ is first, we're going to have to go to Jesus for the wisdom and the strength and the patience and the perseverance to love others.

So, what does true faith look like? Well, the heart of genuine faith is not a list of do's and don'ts, but it's having a true sense on the heart of the love of Jesus Christ and how valuable and precious we are to him and what lengths he went to give up his riches so that we might have his riches.

And in response, it's having a love for him in our hearts and how valuable and precious he is to us. It's seeing his love and his wisdom and his power and his beauty and his authority and his majesty and his kindness and his eternity and his purity and his grace and placing him above everything else in our affections.

[24 : 49] We need to ask ourselves this morning, are you stalling Jesus? You're putting him off. You've got something else in first place. Only you can say. I could never say.

But is there something else at the centre of your affections? The passage is a call for us to decide and to repent and to take Jesus as our Lord and our love today and to walk with him as his disciples.

Now, as we finish, I want to pray. And I thought it would be terrific to pray the words of the first reading for us before Ewan comes and lead us in prayers.

Let's bow our heads for a moment. We pray, Heavenly Father, that according to the riches of your glory, you grant us to be strengthened with power through the Spirit in our inner being so that Christ might dwell in our hearts through faith and that we, being rooted and grounded in love, we may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Jesus Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we might be filled with all the fullness of God.

And we ask this for his glory. Amen.